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THE RETURN OF ASTONISHING BEAUTY

MINECRAFT LEGENDS
THE ICONIC SERIES GOES RTS?!

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BLUE SKIES

Red death

Ben Mansill takes his bomber where fighters fear to fly. Then quickly dies.

It's a well known fact that for several years I was indisputably the best jet bomber pilot in War Thunder. All my mates said so. Ergo: fact. But with the arrival of 4th gen vehicles in the game it's now entered the modern era, and that means I need to enter the modern era, too, and start fighting like a Maverick, not a jet airline pilot. This is one of my all-time favourite games. It's free. Kinda. And the battlefield intensity is incredibly satisfying. Even the starter WW1 vehicles are tops, so check it out. I might see you in the skies. Or a crater.

BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

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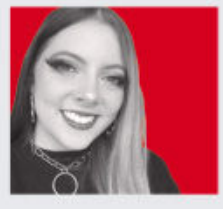
The PC PowerPlay team

FRASER BROWN

This month
Was the only person even more delighted than me to be messing about with miniatures on the job.

WES FENLON

This month
Took a trip to sunny Brazil to discover its PC gaming culture, and to melt into a human puddle.



MOLLIE TAYLOR

This month
Had her first trip to GamesCom, and ate an unreasonable amount of bread and meat.

CHRIS LIVINGSTON

This month
Modded *Skyrim* to contain more people who hate him.

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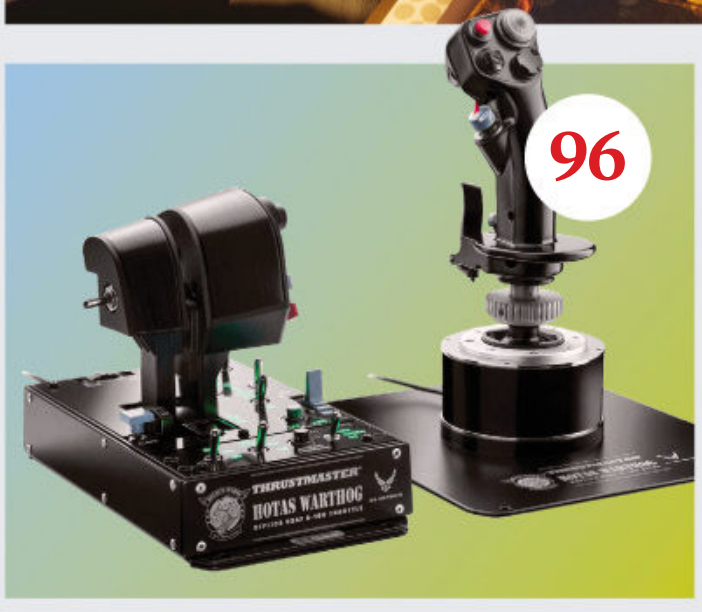

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PAST OASIS

After admitting their MMO 'sucks,' DONKEY CREW reworks the entire game

If you visit the Steam page for early access survival MMO *Last Oasis*, you'll find an article bluntly titled '*Last Oasis* Sucks'. It's not written by a disgruntled player, nor an opinion piece pulled in by Steam's news aggregator. It was written by *Last Oasis*' developer.

Last Oasis is a nomadic survival MMO where players construct and travel in land-crawling fortresses called walkers. It entered Early Access in March of 2020, promptly experienced some major server problems, and three days later went offline and offered refunds. *Last Oasis* resurfaced, but concurrent player counts have wavered between a few thousand and a few hundred since, and its Steam reviews have remained firmly 'mixed'. But players weren't the only ones struggling to enjoy it.

ABOVE: The 'new' Last Oasis puts much more emphasis on the survival mechanics, and adds roaming enemies that attack players and their structures. The world is now a bigger threat than other players.

"When I say it sucks, I mean I'm not having fun for long when playing it. Not as long as other survival games I enjoy," wrote the game's developer Chadz recently. "We could argue back and forth why [but] there was always that one issue remaining: I, personally, am not having fun when playing *Last Oasis* for long."

PLAYERS WEREN'T THE ONLY ONES STRUGGLING TO ENJOY IT

It's a brutally honest statement for a developer to make. Plenty will admit when their game has problems, promise to address negative feedback, and outline future plans. But rarely do you hear such frankness about their own negative experiences while playing their own game.

Chadz goes on to say the developers decided to think less about what needed to be fixed and more about what needed to be

ENGINE FAILURE

GAME ENGINES VANISH

Users of an engine called The Machinery got a nasty surprise this month: an email announcing the project had been abruptly and unexpectedly cancelled. Even worse, instead of an explanation all they got was a demand that they delete any trace of the engine's code they still had access to. ■ ***JW***

COMBINE HARVESTER

DOOM TRACTOR

At the Defcon security conference, hacker Sickcodes gave a live presentation of gaining root access to a John Deere control unit, which locks farmers into the ecosystem of the biggest manufacturer of agricultural equipment. Then he began running a version of *Doom* on it. ■ ***RS***

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS?

NIGHTMARE FUEL

Generating images using AI is big right now with many using the tech to predict humanity's trajectory. When Midjourney prophesied the "last selfie ever taken" the internet seemed to panic. Empty eye sockets, ghoulish facades and a backdrop of corpses; this is what the AI saw in our future. ■ ***KW***

ABOVE: The walkers are inspired by the 'kinetic sculptures' of Dutch artist Theo Jansen. Google 'Strandbeest' for some very cool videos.

completely rethought, "If I were to make *LO* from scratch, what would I do?" This led to the major overhaul that came alongside the post. This update shifted the focus from PvP to almost entirely PvE.

LAST CHANCE

The nomadic vibe of *Last Oasis* has been essentially erased, which is pretty wild considering it was a major selling point of the original. Your walker was your base, a big roaming fort filled with your stuff that you took with you everywhere. And when it was destroyed, typically in PvP, you lost everything. Now, players build static bases and use walkers for excursions, exploration, and combat.

The developer admits this drastic change won't sit well with everyone, and they may have a period of extreme balancing ahead explaining that "There's fun difficulty, there's challenging difficulty and there's ridiculous rage-quit difficulty."

I consider other players quickly destroying my entire base to be rage-quit-level difficulty, but these new changes sound more appealing: I definitely prefer harsh PvE to harsh PvP. As for whether this kind of dramatic U-turn can lead to a brighter future for *Last Oasis*, we'll have to wait and see. ■

Chris Livingstone

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Rightly proud

After a mod removed all Pride flag's from *Spider-Man*, the two largest mod sites in the world banned it.

Stadia's USP

Destiny streamer Luckstruck9 used 11 Stadia accounts to keep checkpoints open for other players.

Hell freezes

MacroBioBoi finally completed the world's first ever solo Hell pacifist run in *Diablo 2: Resurrected*.

Overbotch

Overwatch pro Myunbong was surprised to find out he'd been fired from New York Excelsior via Twitter.

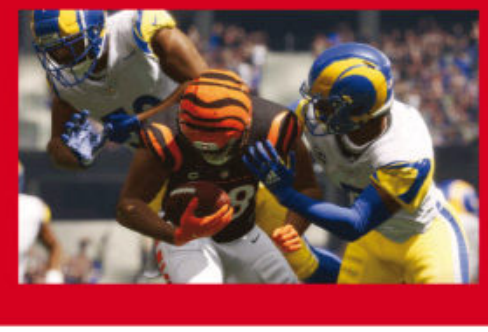
Maddening

Madden 23 on PC doesn't come with the new 'FieldSense' system present on consoles. Stop this nonsense.

Dead and buried

Netflix has already cancelled its *Resident Evil* TV show after just one season, following poor reviews.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Gamescom is the sort of place where, in 2018, somebody claimed that an attendee, while queuing to play *Fortnite*, did a poo in a bag and left it there, and enough people believed this story that the PR for Epic had to tweet "this did not happen". Even though it wasn't true, the fact that so many people *thought* it was true is, in and of itself, a damning condemnation of the entire thing.

It was with some trepidation then that The Spy visited this year's event. Because even though it was consistently 33°C, and filled with the sort of people that other people think would do a poo in a bag, it's also filled with the kind of insider knowledge that The Spy craves. The Spy can watch in real time as businessmen construct makeshift catapults to be flung into the closed booths of various holding companies in an effort to get their publisher acquired. Or at least, The Spy could if The Spy wasn't permanently tethered to the corridor between the third and fourth halls – the only place in the entire Koelnmesse exhibition centre with good ventilation and cool breezes.

The overarching theme of Gamescom was this: if you are a PC gamer in your late 30s, you are about to feel extremely catered to – and not just in the normal way. It's not just the absurd number of RPGs, RTSes, and city builders that were on show, but the fact that many of them are deliberately harking back to cult classics of the '90s. *Homeworld* is back. *System Shock* is back. THQ's *Tempest Rising* is as close to a *Command & Conquer* game as it's possible to be without activating EA's lawyers. Even *Jagged Alliance* is back, and properly this time – with care being taken to do justice to the originals.

THE SPY
The Spy is recovering from over-gaming.

MONGERING FREE

And that's just what's already been confirmed. In late-August, Embracer Group extended the warm hug of ownership to a handful of Square Enix's discarded studios. Both Crystal Dynamics and Eidos Montreal have been embraced, along with the rights to *Tomb Raider*, *Thief*, *Legacy of Kain*, and *Deus Ex*.

So on the one hand, we have a trend of pandering to elder millennials. And on the other, we have the developer of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* and the intellectual property rights to *Deus Ex* both under new management. What's going to happen next?

According to rumourmonger Jeff Grubb, the obvious. "They want to get right back into that," Grubb said on his Game Mess Mornings Twitch show, when asked about Eidos Montreal returning to *Deus Ex*. "They want to do what *Cyberpunk 2077* couldn't. Who knows what that will turn into, but there was no possibility for that conversation to begin under the current Square Enix."

Again, The Spy wants to reiterate that final line. Grubb's insight here is that there is now, under Embracer, the possibility of a conversation. Even if that's more than there was before, it's not much. Bloomberg's Jason Schreier is similarly cautious. "Keep your expectations in check," Schreier wrote in a Resetera thread discussing Grubb's comments. "The game furthest in development at Eidos Montreal right now is a new IP."

"THEY WANT TO DO WHAT CYBERPUNK 2077 COULDN'T"

Perhaps, then, in some long distant Gamescom, many years from now, Eidos will reveal the return of Adam Jensen. The Spy just hopes the queues aren't too long. Spy out. ■

The Spy

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Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

Coromon gives off *Pokémon Ruby and Sapphire* vibes with its vibrant settings and sprites.

UNCATCHABLE

Why has no indie riff on POKÉMON taken off on PC?

Stardew Valley is the golden child of farming sims. Inspired by Nintendo's _Harvest Moon_, it's gone on to sell more than 20 million copies since 2016 and kicked off a torrent of imitators on PC. Why haven't we had that moment for the monster-taming genre? _Pokémon_ clones are abundant, but none have had a sliver of _Stardew Valley_'s success, yet alone _Pokémon_'s. If there's a formula for reimagining classic Japanese series as modern indies, monster tamers haven't found it.

"An RPG where [players] can create their own adventure based on the characters they know is of course appealing," say Jochem and Marcel, the indie developers behind this year's *Coromon*. The challenge for indies is, "Players would often rather stay with what they know than trying out new games," they say.

There have been some modestly successful *Pokémon* clones like MMO *Temtem*, which made headlines last year when it reached 500,000 copies sold in one month on Steam Early Access. *Coromon* passed 100,000 sales on PC and Mac, and the Nintendo Switch version has undoubtedly added to that. Yet that's just a fraction of *Pokémon Sword & Shield*'s 24.5 million.

Eric Barone liberally based *Stardew Valley* on *Harvest Moon*, but it has now surpassed its inspiration in popularity and sales. *Temtem* game director Guillermo Andrades says that *Pokémon*, by comparison, casts a long, long shadow. "Right now there's a lot of reticence towards the games of the genre that are not *Pokémon*," he says. "I think we still have to move forward a bit, and a lot of games in this genre have to come out before players start seeing it as the monster-taming genre, and not the *Pokémon*-like genre. Once the general public is more into this mindset, games will get more leeway to have their own identity and not be compared to their enormous brother and predecessor."

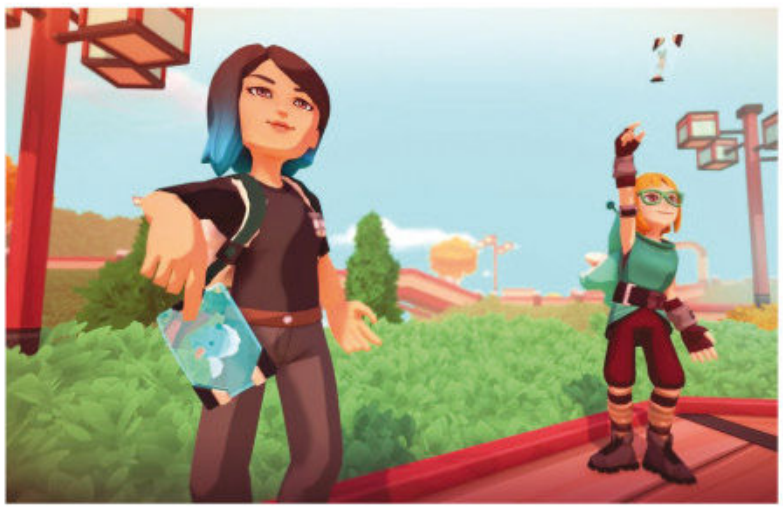
POKÉMON SNAP

Enormous really is the word. Just this year the Pokémon Company reported passing 440 million sales of *Pokémon* software. *Pokémon Legends: Arceus* and *Pokémon Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl* together sold more in one year than *Stardew Valley* has in its lifetime.

Harvest Moon was successful, but not a worldwide cultural phenomenon. *Pokémon* is the highest-grossing media franchise in history. Perhaps many of us aren't invested enough in taming monsters other than *Pokémon* to learn 100 new ones. Developers haven't given up on trying to turn *Pokémon* into a genre, though – and they're at least getting some attention, *Stardew Valley*'s first step towards fame.

Monster success

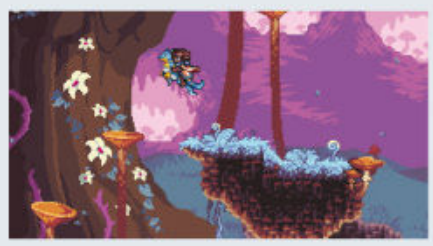
Game Freak CEO Satoshi Tajiri created *Pokémon* using inspiration from his childhood days collecting insects. Nintendo execs initially rejected his pitch, but Shigeru Miyamoto convinced the company to reconsider. The *Mario* and *Zelda* creator also helped shaped the series' future, including the idea to create version exclusive Pokémon so that players could connect with friends and 'catch 'em all'.



FAR LEFT: Train your Temtem pals to fight in double battles and become the ultimate Temtem tamer.

LEARN 'EM ALL *More games to enjoy*

SIRALIM ULTIMATE
Dragon Quest meets *Path of Exile*. Crawl through blocky dungeons, fuse monsters, and decorate your castle.



MONSTER SANCTUARY
Monster Sanctuary incorporates the concept of *Pokémon* into a unique sidescrolling RPG.

NEXOMON
The Nexolord has kidnapped your friend Ellie, and now it's up to you to tame monsters and save your friend.

DISC CREATURES
Humans live in harmony with Disc Monsters. Not actually as much like *Pokémon* as it seems.

One of *Stardew Valley*'s greatest strengths is its community. Barone regularly posted development blogs and kept an open dialogue with followers. *Temtem* community manager Lucia Prieto says the team's relationship with its community is one reason for its current success: developers have even started making community-suggested improvements.

Even smaller monster-taming games like *Siralim Ultimate* credit community for their success. "I don't think many developers are as lucky as I am to have so many players who are as effective at communicating their ideas and providing feedback," says its developer, Zach Bertok.

DON'T COPY THAT HOPPIP

Stardew Valley is *Harvest Moon* for the PC crowd, but it's far more than just a copy. It has its own unique features: deeper character customisation, same-sex relationships, and, er, the ability to make mayonaise.

Some monster-taming games stick closer to the *Pokémon* formula than others. *Coromon* resembles the GBA *Pokémon* games where the new kid in town (or, in this case, the new adult) arrives as the guest of honour and receives a free monster pal as a gift from a professor. In *Temtem*, the child protagonist follows the same goal of becoming a Temtem master. But *Temtem*, like Stardew, also has multiplayer.

"There's this whole social, MMO factor to it that's shiny and exciting," says Prieto. "This in itself already changes a lot of the core elements of the genre, but we built upon that. Combat is always in pairs, and there's no RNG whatsoever during battles... battles are challenging to a degree we think users don't expect."

GAMES LIKE SIRALIM ULTIMATE CREDIT COMMUNITY FOR THEIR SUCCESS

The best 'clones' take their inspirations as a base and build something distinct. That's part of why Denis Sinner, the managing director of Moi Rai Games, chose to make *Monster Sanctuary* part monster taming and part Metroidvania. Sinner also felt *Pokémon* didn't have enough stakes or strategy, so his team focused on giving players more choice, "I tried to make *Monster Sanctuary* feel like you are rewarded if you come up with synergetic monster skill builds or monster team compositions," he says. "Every monster having a full individual skill tree is what gives players a lot of strategy options."

Monster taming games have a tough road. Each one needs to somehow escape *Pokémon*'s shadow or at least grow within it. Developers have found moderate success with supportive communities and unique features, but that hasn't been enough to produce a smash hit. Jochem and Marcel say content creators still derogatorily refer to monster-taming indies as 'Poké-clones' or '*Pokémon* rip-offs', but they're still optimistic.

"Now that more and more indie monster-tamer games are popping up, all with their own unique spin, more and more people seem to be taking on a different opinion on non-*Pokémon* monster-tamer games," they say. We might never narrow down the actual reason why no monster-taming clone has taken off like *Stardew Valley*. That doesn't mean there never will be one, though. ■

Jessica Reyes

ASK AN UXPERT

Sprung Studios CEO JAMES CHAYTOR on UI, UX, and why they're so important

James Chaytor and his teams have worked on *Apex Legends*, *The Elder Scrolls Online*, multiple *Call of Duty* titles, *Microsoft Flight Simulator* and far more than could ever be listed here. Yet Chaytor's story begins before Sprung Studios; even before his videogame work. UI and UX are important elsewhere, too.

After working his way up to creative director in a web marketing firm in the late 1990s, he began consulting with the mobile company Three, who at the time had just rolled out 3G. Chaytor helped the firm with the challenge of making new kinds of content usable on small devices. It was at this point that he founded Sprung Studios, and expanded its services to more clients. But by 2009, the recession had hit budgets hard and companies were pulling together teams for this work.

Chaytor moved Sprung's focus to games, via a small team who had been laid off from Disney Interactive. These developers had a console background, and needed Chaytor's help to make a game equally visible and playable on a small screen. That game was *CSR Racing*... which went on to feature in the 2012 Apple keynote, and make about $12,000,000 a month. This propelled Chaytor into the wider game industry with a bang.

A common misconception is that UI and UX are interchangeable terms. They're not. "The way I always explain this," says Chaytor, "[is that] UX is how something works, and UI is how something *looks*. When you're working with UX, you're not trying to think about the theme of the game ... the questions you're asking are: 'Can I understand this menu system? Are the buttons in the right place?'"

HEADS UP

That said, the lines between UI and UX can blur, as one often informs the design of the other. While Chaytor and his teams at Sprung are now experts in this design, they back up their work with research, to ensure that everything they're designing is working as it should. This research can turn up the occasional surprise.

One piece of research was a simple survey, which included a question asking where players would go in the menu to turn on subtitles. "It was surprising that people were spread between three options. It was very interesting to me that some people went to audio as a place to find subtitles. It makes sense when you think about it. [These short surveys] really cut down on a lot of the little mistakes that might persist through to a final product."

Sprung will ordinarily have 7-14 people working on a game, and they're all similarly trained. While some in the industry specialise in UI *or* UX, this goes against Chaytor's design philosophy. "I don't believe in separating those roles," he explains. "When you're working on UI, you *have* to have an understanding of UX in order to do it. There are so many tiny decisions all through the UX period of the game, because you start with flows, then you have wireframes.

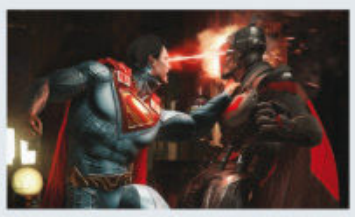
"So we have the UX UI designers, but we also have other areas of UX UI that are so hugely important, like motion. Motion will help to instil certain emotions in the player. You might find that you feel more excited when the UI comes to life to present you with a new card that you've just got or a character you've upgraded."

The industry has made great strides in accessibility and people like Chaytor and his teams are vital to this. "We still find ourselves reminding our clients," he says, "that if you're going to use colour to define different statuses, you also need to have a symbol so that people who have difficulty seeing colour or are colour-blind would be able to see the difference between those cards". It's a keen reminder that if developers want their games to be for everyone, then UI and UX will have to be assigned the importance they deserve. ■

Luke Kemp

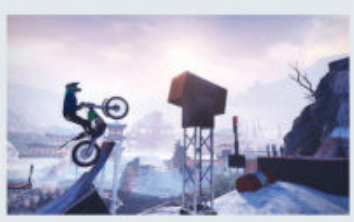
SPRUNG ON YOU

Examples of Sprung Studios' handiwork



INJUSTICE 2
All those unlockable bits and bobs needed a good team to make navigating the menus easy.

JUST CAUSE 3
Thankfully, Rico's careless attitude to getting the job done didn't translate to the UI and UX.



TRIALS RISING
Guess who you have to thank for UI navigation not being one of the trials that you need to fight here?

CALL OF DUTY VANGUARD
Good UI and UX is essential to the flow of a fast-paced shooter like your average *Call of Duty*.

"UX IS HOW SOMETHING WORKS, AND UI IS HOW SOMETHING LOOKS"

TOP: RTS games, even ones as relatively user friendly as *Halo Wars 1* & *2*, demand great UI.

ABOVE: Note how the highlighting makes it clear which icon you're looking at.

FAR LEFT: The number of characters may have increased significantly, but *Apex Legends* remains smooth to navigate.

Incoming

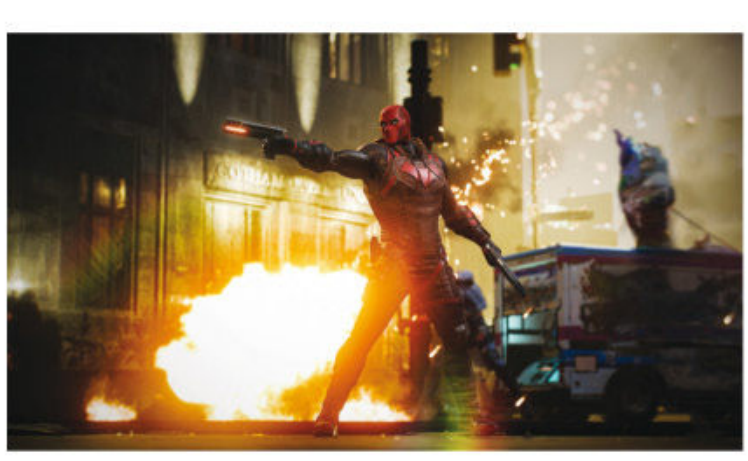
THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM

RELEASE October 18 | **DEVELOPER** Asobo Studio

Amicia and her brother Hugo return for another medieval journey through rat-infested lands as they try to find a new life for themselves.



GOTHAM KNIGHTS

RELEASE October 25 | **DEVELOPER** Developer: Warner Bros Games Montreal

Batman is dead, and it's up to a team of his former sidekicks and allies – Nightwing, Batgirl, Robin and Red Hood – to keep order across Gotham City in this co-op action-RPG.

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2

RELEASE October 28 | **DEVELOPER** Infinity Ward

No, not the one from 2009. Or the remaster of that game from 2020. This new sequel in the rebooted series is... well, it's this year's *Call of Duty*.

3 months

COMPANY OF HEROES 3

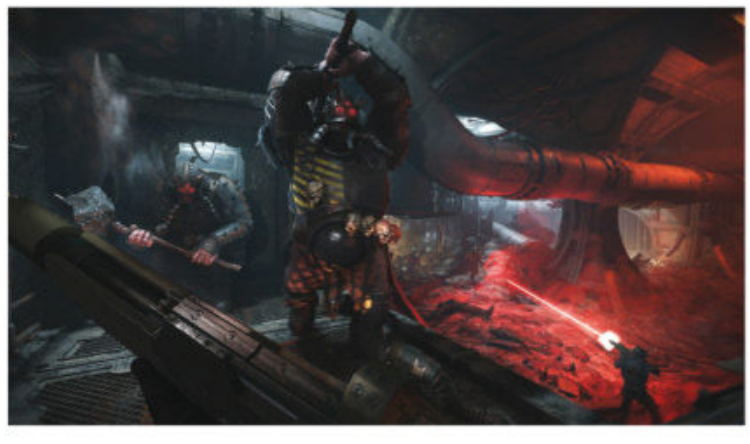
RELEASE November 17 | **DEVELOPER** Relic Entertainment

Explosive WWII action that seems poised to revive not only the series, but the whole RTS genre. Our hands-on previews have us convinced this is going to be a blinder.

EVIL WEST

RELEASE November 22 | **DEVELOPER** Flying Wild Hog

We should've banned developers from using the 'something West' name format years ago. Unrelated to *Hard West*, *Weird West*, *West of Loathing*, or *West of Dead*.



WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE

RELEASE September 13 | **DEVELOPER** Fatshark

Battle through the grim darkness of the far future with three of your mates, and some very big guns, while the cult of a diseased Chaos god swarms to stop you.

6 months

FORSPOKEN

RELEASE January 24 | **DEVELOPER** Luminous Productions

A modern day New Yorker is transported to a fantasy realm, where her new magical powers come with the small catch that she has to save the world.

DELIVER US MARS

RELEASE February 2, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** KeokeN Interactive

An atmospheric and perilous adventure across the surface of the red planet, as you journey to discover what became of missing colony ships.

RESIDENT EVIL 4

RELEASE March 24, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Capcom

A ground-up remake of the classic original that promises more tension and bigger scares to go with its updated graphics, story and controls.

12 months+

STARFIELD

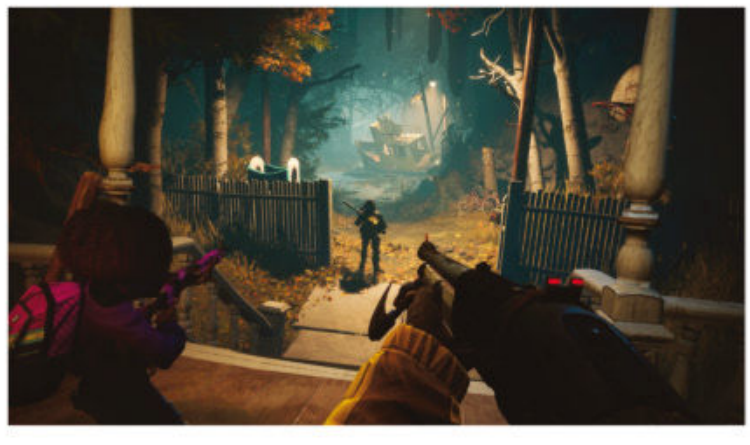
RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios

It sure has been a while since Bethesda last released a new single-player RPG – but if '*Skyrim* in space' can pull off its grand ambitions, it'll be worth the wait.

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Rocksteady Studios

The long-awaited follow-up to the *Batman: Arkham* series, starring Harley Quinn and other super-villains forced to fight evil versions of Superman, The Flash and more.



REDFALL

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Arkane Austin

The team behind *Prey* brings us a co-op, open-world FPS about a team of vampire hunters, each with their own supernatural powers.

DELAYED

RESET THE CLOCK

Midnight Suns **has been delayed to an unspecified date in 2023. The team says it's "to ensure we are delivering the best possible experience for our fans", calling it "the biggest game we've ever made".**

Moonbreaker

MINI BREAKS

MOONBREAKER feels pure tabletop, but on your PC

By Fraser Brown

Videogames owe a lot to their tabletop counterparts, especially when it comes to turn-based strategy and tactics. But one of the best parts of fielding armies of little warriors often gets overlooked in the digital realm: model painting. *Moonbreaker*, from *Subnautica* studio Unknown Worlds, has rectified this frequent omission and then some, giving us something that feels pure tabletop on your PC.

Moonbreaker is a sci-fi-fantasy tactics romp in which you build a crew of unique characters, paint them just like you would real miniatures, summon them into 12-minute battles, and try to defeat the opposing crew's captain. Your goal is simple, then, but beyond that is a whole lot of complexity, drawing from sources as diverse as Warhammer, the board game Cosmic Encounter, and Magic: The Gathering. And the moment you look at it, you'll know you're staring at a tabletop game. The way units move like they're being picked up off the board, and the way the terrain looks like something built for a Warhammer 40k tournament – it's unmistakable.

"We wanted to make something new," says Unknown Worlds co-founder Charlie Cleveland. "We're Unknown Worlds, we like to try crazy stuff. Maybe not that crazy. But we try to push things forward and keep things fresh. We're making the world's best digital miniatures game. We want to take the miniatures hobby and keep what is amazing about it, which is like all the analogue part of it, the imagination part of it, the tactile, physical nature of it. But we want to remove all the other barriers, which are like this giant investment you have to make in money, time, rules, physical setup – all that stuff. We just want to remove all that. We're trying to streamline and make more accessible the entire tabletop hobby, not just the game, but the hobby itself."

The streamlining, in this case, is more about cutting out the faff. As well as the obvious stuff like not needing to spend $100 on some miniatures or schedule a day of warfare with a friend, there's the aforementioned sole objective and short match times, as well as things like the removal of range limits, so a unit can attack an enemy all the way on the other side of the map. Within all these streamlined systems are wrinkles, however. So while ranged characters can attack anyone, regardless of where they are, all the cover and obstacles peppering the battlefield reduces the accuracy of the shot. Sure, you can theoretically hit that distant target, but you're going to need a lot of luck. Your foe can use this knowledge to their advantage by securing their captain in a trickier-to-hit spot, or by blocking the captain with other units.

GROW UP

Battles don't play out like your typical tactics game, where you start at full-strength and every turn threatens to weaken you. First you create your roster, with a single captain and ten crew "kind of Guardians of the Galaxy or Firefly style," says Cleveland. But you don't get access to your full roster when the battle begins. Instead, you get a randomised selection, which can be called down from your orbiting ship. "So the pace builds up. It's not war, and it's not attrition. It's like you're building up, maybe like *StarCraft*, or traditional videogame pacing, where it escalates."

The ship plays a role, too. At the beginning of a match, you'll get a couple of ship assists, picked from a larger pool, giving you access to things like healing through the Medical Recall ability, or the Vortex Beam, which pulls allies and enemies alike towards a specific point. These can also synergise nicely with your units' abilities. If you're playing with one that grows more powerful with each attack, for instance, you can use the Medical Recall assist to take them out of the

ABOVE: I do not like the look of that tongue.

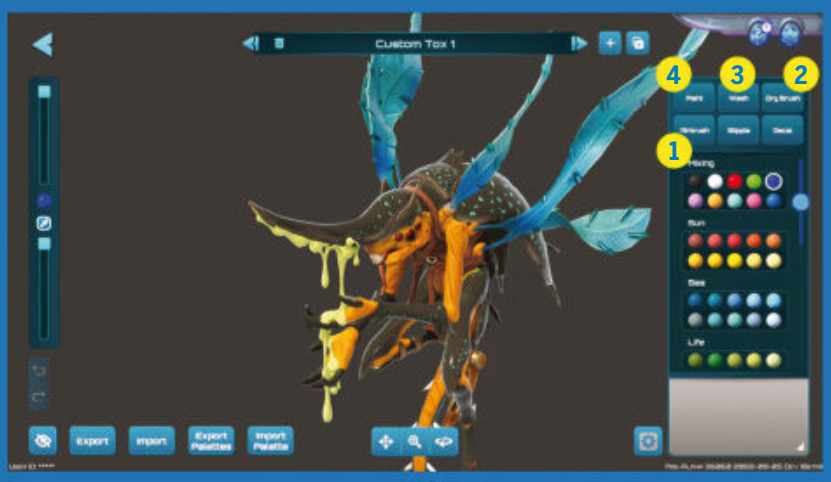
I hope nobody is wearing anything conductive.

fight, heal them up and then plonk them back down with all their stats intact, allowing you to ensure they keep growing and growing.

Active abilities cost Cinder, *Moonbreaker*'s magical resource, which is harvested from the cores of moons. Bringing in units also costs Cinder. Passive abilities just happen in the background and cost nothing, but typically have prerequisites. With Cinder being a limited resource, generating at one per turn, you might want to save them up for some big moves, like firing off a couple of abilities and bringing in another unit all in one turn. You can bank up to three for just such a

ART SCHOOL

Moonbreaker *makes painting easy*



1 The airbrush lets you apply colour.

2 The dry brush gives you shading and highlights.

3 Washes give your model more depth by emphasising the grooves and crevices.

4 Paint mixing lets you create your own colour schemes.

situation. However! There will also be situations where having no Cinder is a boon. The Cornered ability, for example, gives +2 to attack and increases the distance the unit can travel, but only if you've run out of Cinder.

Every unit gets one ability, except captains, who boast three. Extilior, a hulking, heavily armoured captain from the Methedori culture – more on them in a bit – has the Justice passive ability, granting Hope to any allies in range when an enemy is defeated. Hope reduces damage by one, which could make the difference between life and death.

USE RESPONSIBLY

Hope is also one of Extilior's active abilities, so he can pick a specific unit to buff, even if he's not just defeated someone. The final ability, Valorous Blades, is a nasty spinning attack that damages all units in range. Note that both of these two abilities, unlike the passive, specify 'units' and not 'enemies' or 'allies'. You'll see that a lot in *Moonbreaker*, whether it's a healing ability or a more offensive one.

"Everything in this game basically affects, whenever possible, both sides," Cleveland explains. "We want all abilities to be used in many, many different ways that we've never thought about. So we want to make sure that yes, it is possible to kill your own units. Sometimes you actually want to, I mean, it's pretty rare, but it does happen."

Before I'd even taken *Moonbreaker* for a spin myself, when I was just staring at Cleveland's presentation, I was trying to come up with good crew loadouts and figure out which of the long list of abilities both bold and subtle would work well together. It tickles the part of my brain I use to create army lists in Warhammer or decks in card game Netrunner (RIP). You've got units who can fly and ignore all obstacles, flamethrower-wielding smugglers, an ability that heals your captain for every unspent Cinder, or more conventional healers, like the delightfully named Stitchy

McPatches, a robot who can spray units with lovely healing nutrients.

All of these characters belong to one of three cultures, with more coming in future seasons. But when you make your roster, you can mix and match – this isn't a culture war. The Methedori are Roman-inspired protectors, which I guess makes them stuffy space cops, and while that also means there's some aesthetic similarities with Warhammer 40K's Imperium, the Methedori are rather less fascist. Then there are the Smugglers, a rag-tag group of crooks and rebels, including some former Methedori characters. The final culture, the Cholek, have more spiritual leanings – though they certainly aren't pacifists – and an aesthetic inspired by Central American cultures.

ABOVE: You can build a roster with any units, regardless of culture.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Weapons have infinite range, but watch out for cover.

CULTURE VULTURE

There's a lot of variety within each culture, too. Making a Smuggler list doesn't mean restricting yourself to Han Solo and Malcolm Reynolds knock-offs. Instead you can recruit Toxoid, a grotesque, flying bug that's dripping with venom; Crankbait, with her hoverbike and mechanical hand/grappling chain, which lets her drag units towards her; and Chuck & Co, a guy riding a mech that mimics his movements, whose speciality is picking units up and throwing them.

All of these cultures exist within the Reaches, a system of tiny but habitable moons, inside which the precious Cinder resides. It blends sci-fi and fantasy, with characters using weapons both mechanical and mystical, and this extends to space itself, which is not a vacuum, allowing creatures and open-air ships to travel through it. "You can jump on a flying snake and go moon to moon," says Cleveland, which sounds like a dream holiday. It's evocative of the best D&D setting, Spelljammer, and was created by epic fantasy author Brandon Sanderson.

Given Sanderson's credentials as a prolific and popular fantasy novelist, it's surprising that *Moonbreaker* doesn't have a story-driven mode or a campaign. "We tried making a story mode, and we spent way too much time on it," says Cleveland. "We may come back to it. But we basically decided the gameplay was suffering and the story was suffering." But the story and the universe Sanderson has created still comes to the fore via other methods – primarily through audio dramas.

"Every month, approximately, we'll release a new audio drama, which is an acted podcast that you can listen to in a game while you're painting, or out of the game on your phone," says Cleveland. "And you can hear the captains and their stories, and how they're all linked together. They're about 30 minutes long so far. We're still learning how to make them, of course, but we have the full character arcs for literally years. So we're laying the framework for the first three captains in Early Access, and then every four months or so we're going to release a new season with a new captain, new units and new audio dramas. So, yeah, we've got years and years of this planned."

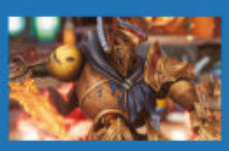
THE ART OF WAR

I've not got much patience for audio logs these days, but science-fiction radio plays? Yeah, I can fully get myself behind that. And unlike, say, an FPS, where the last thing I want to do is stand still and listen to someone narrate their final days, I'd be very interested in listening to some audio dramas about the captains while I paint them.

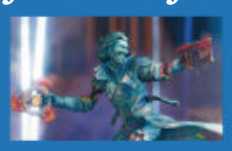
This is very much a tabletop tradition – making the story adjacent to the game or between matches rather than something that plays out during it. At least that's what it's like

CULTURE CLUB

Get to know the first trio of cultures



METHEDORI
Roman-inspired space cops, the Methedori are rule-loving protectors and evocative of Warhammer 40k's Imperium.



SMUGGLERS
An eclectic group of space-faring rogues, the Smugglers are a bunch of free-wheeling weirdos and clearly not a fan of the Methedori's rules.

CHOLEK
Mystical and esoteric, the Cholek are a Central American-inspired group with a penchant for walking on stilts and throwing bombs.

when it comes to strategy games. When I'm painting, I usually have a podcast or TV show on anyway. And I suspect I'm going to be spending a lot of time painting in *Moonbreaker*.

Every character has a default paint job, and they look great, but can you really call it your crew if you haven't painted each of them yourself? Absolutely. Screw gatekeeping. But you should paint them anyway. Unknown Worlds considered giving players unpainted models as the default, like Warhammer "to encourage you to paint", but the team ultimately decided that "it just felt too crappy to have a blank unit".

All the tools I normally have to dig out of the sarcophagus where I keep all my Warhammer stuff have been recreated digitally, and in ways that make them much easier to use. The absolute bane of my existence is edge-highlighting, which requires good eyes and steady hands. My eyes are knackered and my hands are about as stable as a geriatric alcoholic. In *Moonbreaker*, you can do it in a few strokes. What's so great about the end result is that it doesn't look perfect. In places, the highlights might not be completely even, or some parts might be a little more faded than others. Some of this is down to the tools trying to emulate human imperfections, but it's also affected by how vigorous or slapdash you are when you're using them. These touches are what make these characters look like physical miniatures instead of regular 3D videogame models.

There's a basic paint tool, a wash, a dry brush, an airbrush, stippling and decals, and you can even mix colours to create your own. You'll get a lot of different colours to work with without doing that, though, including paints that glow or look like different materials. There's a handy masking tool, as well, so if you're trying to paint your gun to give it a metallic look and don't want to also paint the hand at the same time, you can make it so that the paint only hits the gun. Everything feels like it's been designed to give you all the tools you'd expect with none of the frustration that comes from not being the world's best miniature painter.

"I just want this to be relaxing," says Cleveland. "I learned how to draw over the pandemic. It was using Procreate on my iPad and Apple pencil and I just fell in love with painting and how relaxed I felt. So that's one of the inspirations for this painting setup."

Additional paints, decals, special paint jobs and captain skins will come with new seasons, unlocked via the free seasonal track. Other cosmetic upgrades will also be available, eventually letting you prettify each unit. And then you can give units funky auras by spending another resource, Dust, which might cover them in shadows or fire.

Progressing through the season or adding auras doesn't reflect your skill at the game, but there's also a mastery system that gives units ranks and titles for playing and winning with them. So there are a lot of ways for you to show off when you face your opponents, who will typically be other players, though there is a singleplayer mode known as Cargo Run. "This is heavily inspired by Dungeon Run for *Hearthstone*," explains Cleveland. "We've tried a whole bunch of different singleplayer modes, and this is the one that just works the best."

ABOVE: The Ultramarines would absolutely love this place.

BOSS RUSH

This singleplayer challenge mode pits you against five bosses in a row. These bosses are like "mini captains", Cleveland says, and are unique to the mode. Depending on your captain, you will always start with the same roster, versus a random boss. And each subsequent boss gets more health than the last, ramping up the challenge. To help you out, there are upgrades littering the map, which you can grab to beef up your units. "So you're basically modifying your roster as you play," he adds.

Moonbreaker could hardly be more different from *Subnautica*, but you can still see the familiar

Unknown Worlds design philosophy in the way it's trying to create an accessible game that's still a great source of challenge. Hopefully it will do for turn-based tactics what *Subnautica* did for survival games. But I'm just ecstatic that the painting is so good. The last videogame with an excellent model painting system, *Might & Magic Showdown*, didn't fare so well, but *Moonbreaker* has one advantage: it's not horrible to play.

While it has quite a bit in common with free-to-play live service games, *Moonbreaker* is a buy-to-play deal. And you'll be able to check it out soon: it hits Early Access on September 29. ■

THE REAL DEAL

How to get into model painting IRL

START SMALL

Don't just splash out on a whole Warhammer army. Instead get a cool unit or squad that speaks to you and start experimenting with painting techniques and see how you get on.

INVEST IN GOOD BRUSHES

You'll save more money in the long run by picking up some high-quality brushes. I recommend a small brush for fine details, a larger one for the main areas, and then a dry brush.

BE FLEXIBLE

You're going to make mistakes and you'll wish you'd given them different limbs or weapons. Get some 'green stuff' to fill in mould lines or breaks, and use tiny magnets so you can swap parts easily.

BEYOND WARHAMMER

There's so much more than just Warhammer, and you might be better off getting a game with some cheaper, disposable models when you're just starting out.

GODS OF THUNDER

Nick 'MagzTV' Read reveals how the *Danger Zone* and *Drone Age* updates electrify *War Thunder*'s hyper-intense combat.

Reviewer's system specs: CPU: AMD Ryzen 9 5900X 12-Core, M-Board: MSI MAG X570 Tomahawk WIFI, RAM: Corsair Vengeance RGB Pro 64GB (2x32GB) 3200MHz, GPU: MSI GeForce RTX 3080 Gaming X Trio 10GB, HOTAS: - Virpil T-50CM2

NICK READ
Nick has been into PC gaming going all the way back to the days of the Amiga 500 and is currently the voice behind the military and flight simulation YouTube channel *MagzTV*.

Angry red tracers strobe past the cockpit as I pull the Tomcat into a wide barrel roll. The MiG on my six tries to follow the move as we corkscrew towards the ground at over 800kph, 23mm cannon fire again cuts through the air where I had been just milliseconds before. Looking back over my shoulder I can see the MiG, a Flogger is closing, it's diving slightly faster than I am.

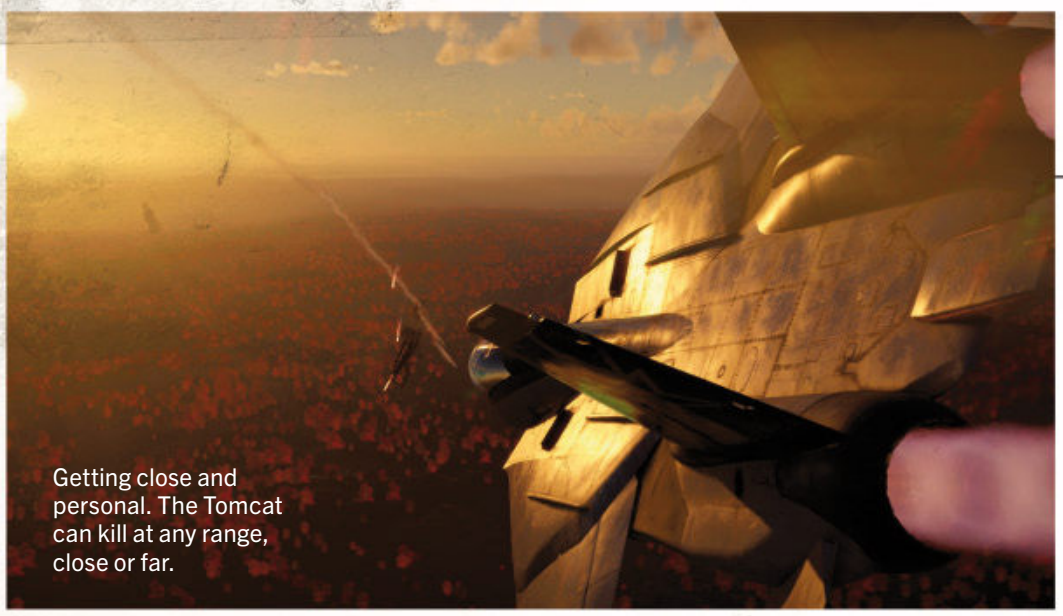
I slam the stick hard over reversing my roll while kicking down on the rudder, the move pushes the MiG out over my right wing right as I pull the throttle back to zero and trigger the air brake. Almost instantly the big Tomcat slows down while the MiG, slower to react overshoots. Stabbing the weapons selection pip, I select Sidewinders and am immediately greeted with the deep growl of a missile lock. Thumbing the firing stud, the AIM-9H Sidewinder leaps off the rail and crosses the few hundred meters between the MiG and I in less than a second. The once mighty Russian warplane reduced to burning scrap falling the few hundred meters left to the ground below.

That whole engagement took maybe 10 seconds. This is *War Thunder*'s current top tier jet combat in a nutshell – every choice you make matters but the time you have to make those choices and react is measured in seconds or less, though I may be getting ahead of myself.

War Thunder, Gaijin Entertainment's World War Two-themed free to play vehicular combat MMO first became available back in 2012. The original game was in many ways similar to other titles such as Wargaming's World of Tanks, in fact the original name for *War Thunder* was World of Planes before being rebranded prior to launch for obvious reasons. However, in the ten years since it's launch *War Thunder* has evolved into something truly of its own today.

First was the addition of tank battles, then ships then the helicopters joined the skies along side fixed wing fighters and bombers. The original time scope of the game also expanded, originally limited to a time frame starting in the late 1930s and ending in the early 1950s with the Korean War, Gaijin has been slowly advancing the tech trees into more and more modern tanks, ships, helicopters and of course, aircraft.

Which brings us to the subject of this issue's article. *War Thunder*'s latest major update *Danger Zone* released in June of this year brought one of the most legendary US naval fighters to have ever flown to the skies of *War Thunder*: the F-14A Tomcat. While the timing with the release of *Top Gun 2* was rather well planned, the introduction of the Tomcat is also important as it heralds a new era for *War Thunder* air battles as we enter the 4th gen age of fighter technology.



Getting close and personal. The Tomcat can kill at any range, close or far.

Launched at altitude, an AIM-54 Phoenix embarks on a long cross-map journey to ruin another pilot's day.

FEEL THE NEED

WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT THE TOMCAT?

While other aircraft in *WT* are fitted with radar systems the Tomcats AN/AWG-9 radar was and is still to this day one of the most powerful radar systems ever fitted to a combat aircraft. From a gameplay standpoint this gives the Tomcat the ability to potentially spot and lock up enemy aircraft out to a maximum range of 185km which is larger than some of *War Thunder*'s maps. Of course, all this would be wasted if you didn't have a missile to shoot out that far, and that's the second thing the Tomcat brings to the table.

THE AIM-54A PHOENIX MISSILE

The AIM-54 Phoenix was the first "Fox 3" or active radar-guided missile ever deployed. This was a highly specialised missile designed to give the Tomcat the ability to intercept and shoot down Russian bombers at a range far beyond their own capability to launch anti-ship cruise missiles at the carrier fleet. This is where the Tomcat gets its often-used nickname of "fleet defender" With a maximum official range of 100nm or around 180km, a cruising speed of Mach 5 and a 61kg proximity warhead, the Phoenix is not a missile to be ignored, and the Tomcat can carry six of them at once. While being designed to take out whole flights of bombers the Phoenix does have its weaknesses but we'll talk about that below.

WHAT ABOUT THE TOMCAT ITSELF?

Ok, the Tomcat isn't all big radars and fancy missiles. Its legendary status is well cemented by being a legendary fighter in its own right.

First let's talk engines, The Tomcat is powered by two Pratt & Whitney TF30 engines putting out a combined 21,600lbf without afterburner or 41,800lbf of thrust with afterburner, and yes, it is important to know the difference between these two power outputs. Without afterburner the Tomcat A's thrust is rather anemic – the early TF30 engines generated slightly less power than the engines of the F-4 Phantom of the same era without afterburner though the Tomcat's flight performance is still better due to the variable sweep wings and improved aerodynamics. This means the F-14A Early is somewhat more reliant on its after burner than later models of the aircraft which are yet to join *War Thunder* will be.

With afterburner it's not even a contest, the F-14 is simply the fastest aircraft currently available in *War Thunder*, with a maximum speed of 2,221kph at 12km high, the Tomcat can render itself almost untouchable by anything short of an advanced missile. This reliance on the afterburner, however, means fuel management is something you need to keep in mind, you will often burn through more than half your fuel load in the first few minutes of a match, so taking enough to both let you get into position at the start of the match and enough to keep you going in the dogfight is important.

And yes, I did mention the wings, didn't I?

Variable geometry or sweeping wings are not new to *War Thunder*, being introduced a few patches ago with the Soviet SU-17 and the MiG-23, still the Tomcat does it best. The sweeping wings are what allows the Tomcat its legendary reputation as both a dogfighter and an interceptor. With the wings in the forward swept position the Tomcat generates more lift than almost any other contemporary fighter of the time making it a phenomenal turn fighter. In the fully swept position the Tomcat takes on all the advantages of a delta wing, trading agility and maneuverability for acceleration and high speed.

For most people the wing sweep will be automatic, with the wings beginning to sweep to the rear as you pass 800kph IAS, however you can manually control the wings with advanced settings, though that comes with some risks which I'll cover.

BELOW: Many hardcore players swear by the cockpit view, though external views offer more overall visibility.

THE AIM-54 PHOENIX WAS THE FIRST "FOX 3" OR ACTIVE RADAR-GUIDED MISSILE EVER DEPLOYED

The Tomcat loves to dogfight, with its close-range Sparrow missiles being a potent weapon system.

THE TOMCAT IS SIMPLY ONE OF THE MOST COMPLEX AIRCRAFT CURRENTLY AVAILABLE TO FLY IN *WAR THUNDER*, BUT IT'S ALSO ONE OF THE MOST FLEXIBLE.

War Thunder's visuals are often jaw-dropping, and best of all the engine runs sweetly on even low-end PCs.

A TOMCAT IN YOUR TOOLBOX

HOW DO I USE THIS BEAST?

The Tomcat is simply one of the most complex aircraft currently available to fly in *War Thunder*, but it's also one of the most flexible. Once all the weapon options and performance upgrades have been unlocked a player can configure it into any number of roles ranging from long range sniper to close range dogfighter, you can even set it up as a "Bombcat" by fitting a substantial ground strike payload while still bringing air to air capability.

Because the Tomcat is so flexible and surprisingly good in all these roles, it will really come down to the preferences of the pilot on how they want to configure. Personally, I tend to fly with a custom loadout I call the "Fleet Defender", consisting of a mix of Phoenix and Sidewinder missiles on the pylons and four Sparrow missiles on the belly.

MISSILE MATTERS

Starting the battle, I tend to load up 30 minutes worth of fuel and do an aggressive afterburner climb to around 35,000ft. During the climb switch the radar over to TWS or Track While Scan mode, select the Phoenix missiles and lock the first target that your radar spots. The Phoenix missile is not hard to evade – it's fast and has a massive range – but it's slow to turn or react so this is your best opportunity to get a kill with it. Lazy pilots often AFK or simply set up a climb angle in *WT* and do not move or change direction again until they hit a target altitude, the Phoenix is ideal to punish players for that lack of care, removing them from the battle early.

After that we are ready for the merge and the dogfight. Your opening missiles are the four Sparrows. The Sparrows are a Mach 3 capable semi-active radar-guided missiles, they can lock a target out to about 40km range and are effective at up to 15km in a closing situation. As radar guided missiles they require no rear aspect, so you can fire from the front before the merge and take down high priority targets early. I tend to prioritise targets by altitude first and then battle rating. Most aircraft at top tier in *War Thunder* are quite dangerous, but those at altitude are usually the most dangerous of all, so start at the top and work your way down to ground level.

ABOVE: Right now we have the early A model Tomcat. Hopefully down the line we'll see evolved versions like the D with its far more powerful engines.

CLOSING FOR THE KILL

Once merged and in the dogfight, things get complex. Missile selection will depend on range, inside of 3km

you'll be looking for Sidewinders or guns, outside you'll be switching to Sparrows. Now the complexity of the dogfight itself comes into play. Theoretically the optimal speed for turning in the Tomcat is around 900 km/h IAS at sea level, this is the Tomcat's highest sustained turn rate, however at this speed it will be impossible regardless of crew skill level to prevent your RIO from blacking out. At about 800km/h IAS at sea level however, you can maintain a sustained turn at a slightly lower rate without blacking out so you will need to dance between these to speeds on the edge of blackout to optimise your turn radius.

Last of all don't be afraid of bugging out. If you get into a fight you can't win, open up the throttles and put some distance on the target. You have the engine power advantage with afterburners, so take advantage of that. Set yourself up again and make a second pass at the target from a better position.

BELOW: Splash one bogey. A Tomcat shows its belly to the helpless victim in one final insult.

ONWARDS, UPWARDS
THE FUTURE OF WAR THUNDER

At the time of writing, Gaijin Entertainment has just announced the next major patch for *War Thunder* called *Drone Age*, and much like the current *Danger Zone* patch, the timeline and technology is being pushed forward again. First and the namesake of the patch is the addition of scout and combat drones such as the MQ-1 Predator to *War Thunder* ground battles, the scout drones being an unlockable module that can be used by light tanks at any time in battle to recon the battlefield for their team without the player needing to leave their tank, while the combat drones will be an extra vehicle spawn available to players who earn enough points in battle. But these won't be the only new vehicles to join the skies. Several new vehicles are slated to be added to *War Thunders* air trees.

Two versions of the SU-25 Frogfoot will be made available – the Su-25 as a standard in tree aircraft, and the SU-25K which was an export model as a premium. These aircraft are the Soviet answer to the US A-10 Warthog already available to American pilots. First entering service in 1981, the SU-25 Frogfoot is a proven and capable ground attack aircraft with a wide and flexible payload that should be effective in both air RB battles and ground RB battles.

For those more into air to air combat the beautiful Dassault Mirage 2000 will be joining the French tree, having first entered service in 1984 the M2000 will be both the most advanced and first full generation 4 fly-by-wire aircraft added to *War Thunder*. While relatively light on weapons options, this deadly delta wing was designed for one purpose – to clear the skies of France of any aggressor. The raw power of the Tomcat vs the agility of the M2000 should make for some heated dogfights. Other new aircraft slated to be added include the British Harrier II and the Italian G.91Y, which is an earlier version of the G.91YS already in game. This new version gets a lower BR for matchmaking, however lacks missiles and should spice up the early Korean War combat nicely.

The German tree will also receive the MiG-23BN, this was a mid-1970s to 1980s ground attack variant of the Flogger flown by East Germany during the Cold War. While limited in its air-to-air capability it should add some much-needed strike capacity to the German lineup.

War Thunder's future is looking solid, with the ground trees already advanced up to some of the most modern main battle tanks available, and the addition of drones, it's looking more and more like Gaijin is now switching gears to do the same with the aircraft trees.

Where will it end? Well, I'll just say that I'm interested in seeing what top tier battles will look like between the F-22 Raptor and its contemporaries. PC

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FULL THEATRE COMBAT

Gaijin developer Tom Morgan leads newcomers into this thrilling war zone where you can fly, drive and sail to battlefield victory.

What is *War Thunder*? In quite short, bold terms, it's one of the most comprehensive military vehicle combat games ever made, which is quite a grandiose claim that requires a lot to back it up, thankfully though there is a lot here.

War Thunder is available on PC, PS5, Xbox Series X/S, as well as the previous console generation. It revolves around dynamic PvP battles between Aircraft, Ground Vehicles and Naval vessels. Every vehicle is modelled with a degree of detail and complexity seldom matched in thematically similar games, with every vehicle coming with a dynamic and true to life model.

Aircraft respond accurately to damage, shots hitting anywhere on the plane will in turn affect its ability to fly, every part can be damaged or destroyed, from control wires to entire wings.

Ground vehicles come with painstakingly accurate armour layouts, and also have a modelled, functional interior. All of the crew and internal components can be hit and damaged, a tank shell entering a vehicle will have multiple knock on effects that need to be mitigated quickly in order to stay in the fight.

Naval vessels similarly have extremely complicated internals; every room, every coal bunker, every ammunition elevator is present and can be damaged. Ships will list when taking on water, rooms will flood, and every ship comes with the exact complement of crew that historically served on it.

ASTONISHING VARIETY

And despite all vehicles in the game coming with this level of depth and detail, there are over 2,000 of them playable in game – from the Dreadnaughts of the 1910s, to main battle tanks and helicopters still in service today, as well as a wealth of vehicles in between. Each vehicle can be upgraded and customised to really make it unique to you, from historical decals and camouflage, to even bits of foliage that you can use to decorate and conceal your tanks. There's also an optional 4k texture pack that can be applied both to vehicles and environments.

The game also offers various modes for different pacing and approachability. The two main modes are Arcade and Realistic, with the latter being the way in which the game is intended to be approached. In this mode vehicles are as true to life as possible without compromising on gameplay, they are as fast and responsive as they were in real life. Arcade is a more forgiving and approachable experience, especially for those who haven't yet played a game like this one. Vehicles are faster and easier to control, and cut out a lot of the more technical parts of combat that may be overwhelming at first.

There are modes with just aircraft, modes with just tanks, but perhaps the most interesting is 'Combined Battles', which takes tanks and aircraft into the same map. This mode is realistic in difficulty, and really presents the most engaging gameplay. There are no enemy nameplates in this mode, so you need to spot and identify enemies by eye. This really lets every type of vehicle shine – light tanks can push the flanks, heavy and medium tanks make up the brunt of the force, while anti-air vehicles hang back and protect the sky from fighters and bombers. With this level of variance in tactics and vehicles, no two battles are alike.

The vehicle classes in *War Thunder* don't come with any particular gamified attributes, there are no special abilities or specific roles that certain vehicle types have to fill. You can really do anything with any vehicle which adds a lot to the dynamics of *War Thunder*'s gameplay.

"EACH VEHICLE CAN BE UPGRADED AND CUSTOMISED TO REALLY MAKE IT UNIQUE TO YOU"

You don't know what vehicles will be on the enemy team in any given matchup, so there's no perfect universally winning strategy in any given situation.

As well as that, because of the variance, there's no way to completely optimise your approach in every game you join, which stops things from quickly getting stale and keeps you on your toes.

Use the speed and agility of light vehicles like the French Mephisto to shoot and scoot.

BELOW: The sexy Swedish Stridsvagn 122A is a modern monster on the battlefield.

NOT JUST A NUMBERS GAME

A lot of competitive games can be broken down to 'Cold Numbers'; stats that can be utilised and streamlined to completely optimise the game experience to near mathematical perfection, which often sucks the fun out of a game, and can gate keep more casual players from even having the chance of defeating a veteran.

War Thunder is far from this though, the sheer variety in vehicles and maps makes it impossible to account for every possible outcome preemptively, even the best players will run into situations they didn't prepare for, and this is where the game is at its best – getting into a tricky situation and using the advantages of your vehicle to get out of it on top.

War Thunder has no hit points for vehicles – to take down an aircraft you need to fire enough rounds into the airframe to break it apart, tear off wing spars or destroy the engine. Tanks can be destroyed by penetrating their armour and

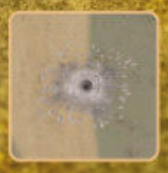
ASTONISHING DETAIL *The graphical fidelity of War Thunder's vehicles and terrain is stunning.*

MODELS

Each vehicle model is created with an extremely high level of detail, down to every rivet and scratch. Ground vehicles even feature a slider that lets you customise the level of wear on your tank.

ENVIRONMENTS

Even maps are full of little details, puddles of water form naturally, and splinters of wood and other debris litter the ground if you look close enough – terrain can even be deformed with bombs or high caliber rounds.



DAMAGE

Vehicles themselves also respond dynamically to damage, different types of rounds will leave different marks on vehicles, and sometimes a round will even get stuck half way into the armour.

Aussie Aussie Aussie! Do us proud and score some wins in an Australian-flagged M1A1 Abrams tank.

detonating their ammo or fuel storage, or by incapacitating their crew with shrapnel. Ships can be brought down in several ways too, either by detonating their ammo magazines, flooding them completely, or by causing enough casualties across the vessel that it no longer has enough personnel to keep the ship running.

Every possible vehicle matchup presents a different approach, you'll need to use your knowledge of the enemy's defensive and offensive attributes to beat it, as it's not always a case of seeing an enemy and clicking on them.

Matchmaking is separated by Battle Rating or 'BR', this is effectively an in-universe combat rating for the vehicle, and it dictates what vehicles you can encounter while playing it. This number is directly relative to the performance of the vehicle rather than the year it was produced, as historically, real-world combat was much less fair. But, there's nothing stopping you from shaking it up a bit. In *War Thunder* you can take a lineup of vehicles into battle, so if you want to destroy a modern M1A2 Abrams with a WW2 era KV-2, you're welcome to give it a shot.

So, this would be a good opportunity to give you some tips and tactics for different parts of the game. Thanks to our wonderful community however we have plenty of guides for just about everything in the game. As *War Thunder* is constantly growing and evolving, the medium of video guides can keep you better up to date than the words you're reading now.

But what you won't find as commonly are any guides on how to approach the game itself, chiefly because there isn't a black and white way to play a game like this one, or at least an individual person can't tell you how to enjoy something – which is absolutely right. But, from my 10 years of experience with this game, there are certainly healthy and simultaneously unhealthy ways to approach it. If you're a fan of vehicles, this game will drop your jaw, and so hopefully, if you're still with us, I can help you enjoy it as much as I do.

A FEW OF THE MANY

War Thunder offers a huge variety of different aircraft for every occasion – old, new, light or heavy.

A-10A
One of the most legendary close air support aircraft in the world, nothing can withstand its vast array of ordinance or 30mm cannon.

B-26
A rugged and well defended bomber, more than capable of giving a few fighters a run for their money with its five frontal machine guns.

J-8B
The current headliner for China, a fast and agile jet with very powerful air to air missiles, giving it a potential advantage in any situation.

SBD-3
A versatile naval aircraft found in the early ranks, great to try from the offset as both a well armed fighter and an adaptable bomber.

STARTING OUT

The main tip I can give you from the offset is to play everything. A common mistake I see people make is to 'main' a nation, or even main one line in a nation, this really limits your scope and makes for quite slow progression. It's always better to make incremental progress across all nations in the game, for both gameplay and your enjoyment.

The game does let you buy into top ranks right away if you like, there are plenty of fast jets and advanced MBTs in the premium side of the tree that will let you experience the high ranks faster. This area of the game is very competitive and might be a rough start, but it is the fastest way to progress and you will see yourself unlocking lower rank vehicles very quickly.

In quite honest terms, to progress through the tree you either need to trade time or money. Money is an absolute but time is a variable, in the sense that the time required to earn experience and unlock new vehicles is relative to how well you play. For this reason skill is also a factor here, and the best way to develop your skills is in the lower ranks where you can explore and find good map positions and also get a feel for the flow of gameplay.

This area of the game is a much safer environment in which to learn the key mechanics of the game. At the start, vehicles are naturally less capable and as such accommodate for more mistakes; offensively and defensively. So the more time you spend upgrading your vehicles in the lower ranks the more opportunity you have to learn the maps, different play styles and the general pros and cons of each type of vehicle across multiple nations, as well as passively learning about the vehicles you're fighting.

Vehicles higher up the tree also aren't necessarily 'better vehicles' competitively, due to the Battle Rating system the vehicles you'll fight will increase in performance as you progress. It's not like an FPS shooter, where you start with a little pistol and end up with a machine gun firing lasers – all the while still fighting the same type of opponent. In *War Thunder*, a pre-war biplane can be a better vehicle relative to its Battle Rating than a modern day jet, so you will absolutely do yourself a disservice by skipping over all of these interesting early vehicles which offer thrilling gaming.

"IT'S NOT LIKE AN FPS SHOOTER, WHERE YOU START WITH A LITTLE PISTOL"

IMPORTANT FIRST STEPS

A good start to this game if you're up for taking it slow, is to go through Rank I of every nation and 'spade' all of its vehicles. This basically just means unlocking all of the modifications for it (this adds a little 'Ace of Spades' mark to the vehicle card). The community often likes to compare how many spaded vehicles they have with each other as it's a good way of showing off how much you've really mastered a nation.

Another benefit to 'Spading' vehicles is that it's tangible progression, not only are you unlocking new things which makes your brain happy – your vehicle is actively getting more powerful, which is a great feedback loop to stick to as when you start out after every match you'll be unlocking modifications very quickly. This means that you are constantly achieving something that you can feel the advantage of in game directly.

A lot of *War Thunder* is knowing your enemy. If you are familiar with the vehicle you're engaging - be it an aircraft, tank or ship – you're naturally in a better position to combat it. It's all well and good reading about vehicles on the wiki, or watching a review of a vehicle, but playing it yourself offers a much more tangible advantage in these situations.

As in-game vehicles are recreated

BELOW: JFK's PT-59 motor gun boat needs a new commander. Is it you?

from real world machines, they of course aren't perfect and have their shortcomings. At the barebones, using a vehicle in *War Thunder* is about identifying its drawbacks and mitigating them as much as possible while actively utilising its advantages. If you're new, you may only realise these disadvantages when you get destroyed by another vehicle, so when the time comes that you change nation and eventually start fighting the vehicle you were playing, you already know from experience how to best defeat it.

Progressing this way also keeps the Battle Rating of your vehicles roughly in line with each other, so you can constantly maintain a powerful lineup of vehicles that complement each other well.

One of the most powerful attributes a vehicle has in game is versatility. It's great having a devastating cannon or a lot of armour, but if you can't adapt to various situations then you won't last very long on the battlefield. *War Thunder* is an asymmetrical game. Different maps and scenarios cater to certain play styles more than others, so the more options you have available to you via the vehicles you take into battle, the more capable you can be in any given situation.

TAILORING YOUR APPROACH

A very important part of *War Thunder* is an area not really spoken about much, again as it falls into a more vague area of discussion; the nature of the game being Free to Play. And with free to play games, there's often a compromise you need to make when approaching them. If you boot up the game for the first time, scroll to the end of the tree and decide you want the most expensive, modern and powerful vehicle right now – you will likely be disappointed when it takes a while to get there.

> "I TRULY BELIEVE THAT YOU 'BEAT' THIS GAME THE MOMENT YOU REALISE PROGRESSION IS ARBITRARY. "

It's a big task to push to the end of a tree and, depending on the time you have available, it will be a while before you manage to get there. And this is why it's a good idea to gauge what's possible for you first before setting your sights on the end of the journey. The end of the line is not necessarily where the game is at its best, and it certainly won't be for you if you rush all the way there without taking the time to learn the skills required to perform at that level. By taking it slow and incrementally, you will absolutely have a better experience.

I truly believe that you 'beat' this game the moment you realise progression is arbitrary. A lot of players will make their sole focus progressing and unlocking the next vehicle in the line. As opposed to just playing the game to have fun, with the progression being a passive part of the experience. As soon as these priorities flip, the game just becomes a job, which is entirely counter to what the experience should be.

BELOW: The immense Kongō-class battlecruiser out hunting for prey.

This isn't to say that you should disregard all notion of ever getting to the top ranks, and it likely won't take you a monumental amount of time, but it all depends on how you approach the game, and this is where compromise comes back in. Setting your goal from the start of the game to reach the end in one jump will lead to a lot of time spent where you aren't reaching your goal, which in turn won't be a good feedback loop. It may feel like a lot of 'dead time', which likely won't make you feel very happy at all.

I would go into this game with a timeline in mind. Figure out your main goal, the conclusion of the journey, and put that at the end. Then, fill it up with lots of other little things along the way. Try and truly master the vehicles you enjoy, by spading them and unlocking all of their camouflages so you can show

other players that you really are an expert. Something else I do as well is to only apply decals to my vehicles after I've mastered them in this way, another small reward I can invent for myself.

This way, you're achieving tangible steps towards your end game, and every few matches you will make strong progress towards a little goal along the way, so in every game session you have you're coming away from it with something achieved.

This may be a bit pretentious – apologies in advance but humour me with this. If possible go get yourself a standard writing pen, any kind will do. Now draw a small box about the size of a match box, give yourself 10 seconds to shade in the entire thing then read on.

Unless you're the patron saint of colouring you probably didn't get very far, it's a big square. So – try this, take your pen and draw a grid over the square with vertical and horizontal lines, now (provided I haven't killed all of your patience) colour it in square by square. You might find now that the task seems a bit easier, you have guidelines to work inside of, and your progress is more tangible when segmented like this. I used to draw a lot when I was younger, and this is how I'd colour in houses – and it's also how I approached *War Thunder* in a very disconnected sense. This way of dividing up the game's challenges and tasks helped me end every game session with an achievement while I worked towards the shiny jet I wanted.

ABOVE: A Russian WW2-era KV1 tank gives some hell to a modern M1A2 Abrams.

THE BIG WORLD OF WAR THUNDER

This approach also helped me appreciate the little things in the game, completing entire ranks of vehicles, customising my tanks to match historical photos with the paint schemes I'd unlock, I even found that my interest in military vehicles grew by spending time playing some of the stranger vehicles that people often overlook by blitzing through the tiers as fast as possible.

Another soft way of improving your experience is finding some friends to play with. Journeys are more enjoyable with others and you can find innumerable Discord servers for *War Thunder*, some very general and some very specialised, so whoever you are there's a place for you here. If you're completely new to the scene, I'd recommend hopping on Twitch and watching some *War Thunder* streamers live, they're always receptive to questions and most likely have communities too for you to join if you're interested. I've personally made some lifelong friends from just chatting with other people in matches. It's a fantastic community.

My closing advice would be to meet the game half way. You won't be able to unlock everything in a week, but you will be able to make some good progress and experience some truly enjoyable vehicles.

Whether you're up for picking up a premium account or want to go in completely free to play, as long as you go in with a reasonable expectation on what's possible for you, you may just find your next favourite game for years to come.

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FEATURE

SUO

PC GAMING IN *Brazil*: EXORBITANT HARDWARE, IRREPRESSIBLE COMPETITIVE SPIRIT, AND THE MOST INFAMOUS LAUGH ON THE INTERNET

Words by Wes Fenlon

Illustration by John Strike

If Brazil is famous for one thing, it's the laugh. Or maybe the Amazon – that whole rainforest is kind of a big deal. Or Pelé, legendary football player. Or right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro? Or the Caipirinha, the national drink? Look, Brazil is the fifth biggest country in the world: it has a lot to be famous for. Brazilian gamers will point to its history of Sega Master System clones and bootleg game cartridges, creative workarounds for outrageous import prices. But if you ask PC gamers, it's gotta be *huehuehue*.

The Brazilian Portuguese version of *hahaha* became a meme in early MMOs, and later in *League of Legends*, as the games attracted huge numbers of Brazilian players. *Huehuehue* became a trolly way for others to mock Brazilian players, though the indie developers I met in São Paulo during the Brazil International Games festival felt like they were firmly in on the joke. "Those of us from Brazil, we love this," says indie developer Leonardo Castanho. "We do this joke with ourselves, sometimes. Latin American players use *jajajaja*, and we make fun of that, too."

Brazil's famous laugh may have more than a little to do with the country's competitive nature in sports and esports. Camilla Slotfeldt, founder of BitCake Studio, had mischief in her eyes when she broke down the difference between *huehuehue* and real Brazilian laughter. "It's very common for people to laugh like *huahuahua*," she says. "*Huehuehue* is more of a troll kind of laugh, and it became a meme that represented the trolling side of Brazilians, where you do things in a way that you shouldn't really do, but kind of get away with it. That's *huehuehue*."

> **"YOU'RE SCARED YOUR GPU WILL BURN [OUT] WHEN THE ELECTRICITY GOES DOWN"**

Before going to Brazil I thought the laugh was mostly used against Portuguese-speaking players. But after speaking to Slotfeldt, who's only ever seen *huehuehue* typed by other Brazilians, I realised that many of the country's PC gamers solely experience it as an in-joke. Brazil's gaming scene is its own pocket galaxy – partially because it doesn't get enough attention from the rest of the world, and partially because Brazil really is that big all by itself. What's a little light trolling between you and 95 million fellow gamers?

ARM AND A LEG

According to stats published by Newzoo at the 2021 Brazil International Games festival, close to half of Brazil's 215 million people play games, with 24% of them on PC. The PC market may be the smallest, but the

1

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developers I talked to says that's largely about access, not taste. Being a PC gamer in Brazil means you're either wealthy enough to afford obscenely expensive hardware, or you're most likely playing free-to-play games like *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* on a low-spec machine.

In much more dramatic terms, being a PC gamer in Brazil means, "You're constantly scared your GPU will burn [out] when the electricity goes down," says Thiago Cancian, lead designer of the indie team making pinchy crustacean battler *Knights of the Deep*.

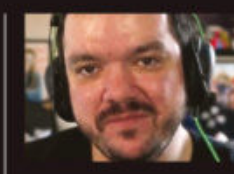
Buying pricey tech from abroad is unrealistic for the average Brazilian, thanks to taxes and a weak exchange rate, particularly against the US dollar. For years any import goods bought online were taxed 60%, so even a budget $1,000 PC would actually cost $1,600 – or 8,000 Brazilian real. The average monthly wage, according to Brazil's government, is about R$2,600, or AUD$735. A modest PC would cost more than three months' pay even if you didn't have pesky expenses like food and rent.

Despite the popularity of free-to-play games, getting into PC gaming still ultimately comes back to hardware. For the 12 million Brazilians who live in favelas, owning a PC is impossibly out of reach. According to a 2021 survey, 43% of Brazilians in favelas have either poor mobile internet at home or none at all. Cyber cafes provide key access to the internet, and to games.

THE COUNTER-STRIKE LEGACY

***Three moments from Brazil's love affair with* Counter-Strike**

TRIPLE CHAMPS
In 2016, SK Gaming's Brazilian team became #1 in the world, winning Dreamhack Austin, ESL Pro League S3 and ESL Cologne.



GAULES CONQUERS TWITCH
At *CS:GO* Antwerp 2022, Alexandre 'Gaules' Borba set the #9 Twitch viewership record.

RIO SELLS OUT
ESL is holding its first-ever Brazilian major in November. 15,000 tickets sold out within an hour.

A WAY IN

Esports is starting to look like a viable career for a lucky few thanks to organisations like AfroGames, which offers favelas access to PC games and English and programming classes. But little of the money ends up in the players' pockets. In 2021, nonprofit publication Rest of World highlighted how esports sponsors have seen product sales spike in Brazil while players still can't afford their own PCs. Winners of a major tournament, "Made no more than a combined $6,000 – a modest amount, considering the tournament's final was broadcast by SporTv, one of the biggest sports channels in Brazil," Rest of World reports.

The situation is getting slightly better: the government has reduced import tax rates 20% in the last year to combat inflation. But high-end

1 BitCake honed its 3D action chops with *Holodrive*, which is F2P on Steam.

2 *Relic Hunters Legend* has some big ideas about making online multiplayer more communal.

3 Yes, *Knights of the Deep* has lobsters with rocket launchers.

4 I don't know much, but I know anything with a keytar in it is cool, so *Keylocker* is alright in my book.

1 The BIG festival got some major players this year: Nintendo, Xbox, and PlayStation all had booths.

2 *Astrea* takes a lot from *Slay the Spire*, but its art is a cut above.

3 Casually searching for your soul in *Eternal Hope*.

4 *Relic Hunters Legend* allows you to choose from several Hunters with unique abilities.

hardware is still largely out of reach. Until recently, Cancian's three-man indie team was working on ten-year-old PCs. "Things are improving slowly," Cancian says. "I'm looking forward to the next decade – hardware will be more accessible, and more people will be able to start developing games here. I think the hardware being as expensive as it is really is a tough barrier to entry."

Camilla Slotfeldt, who spent her teenage years playing Korean MMO *Ragnarok Online*, the game that made *huehuehue* famous, says that PC gaming today seems to skew a bit older due to mobile. "For a long time PC gaming was huge, but now a lot of young people don't have PCs and just have phones. MMOs got huge here in Brazil, and then MOBAs... [now] some households just don't have PCs, which is very weird for me, but each person has a phone and they do basically everything on the phone."

But Brazil's indie developers are targeting the PC. They see it as a greater opportunity than the overcrowded mobile market, and despite how many players there are in Brazil, the real dream is to break through to an international audience.

MADE IN BRAZIL

Selling games internationally is one area where the exchange rate works out favourably for developers based in Brazil, and it's realistically the only way for indie studios to grow; there's simply no way for them to make games like *Valorant* and *CS:GO*, which are particularly popular in Brazil. 2D indies dominated the BIG festival when I visited this year.

For Brazil's PC gamers, what's popular is a lot like what's popular anywhere else. The top-selling games of June 2020 on Nuuvem, a Brazilian online store, are all familiar names: *Civilization VI*, *Monster Train*, *Darkest Dungeon*, *Dark Souls*. But language can be a roadblock: according to SteamSpy only about 8,000 of Steam's 63,000 games are available in Portuguese, and only about 5% of Brazilians speak English.

"I learned with *Pokémon*," says Slotfeldt. "The games were only in English – still to this day, actually, *Pokémon* doesn't have Portuguese. A lot of people aren't happy about that."

It's an understandable frustration – Nintendo launched the Switch in Brazil in 2020, so it's clearly interested

BRAZIL'S INDIE FACES

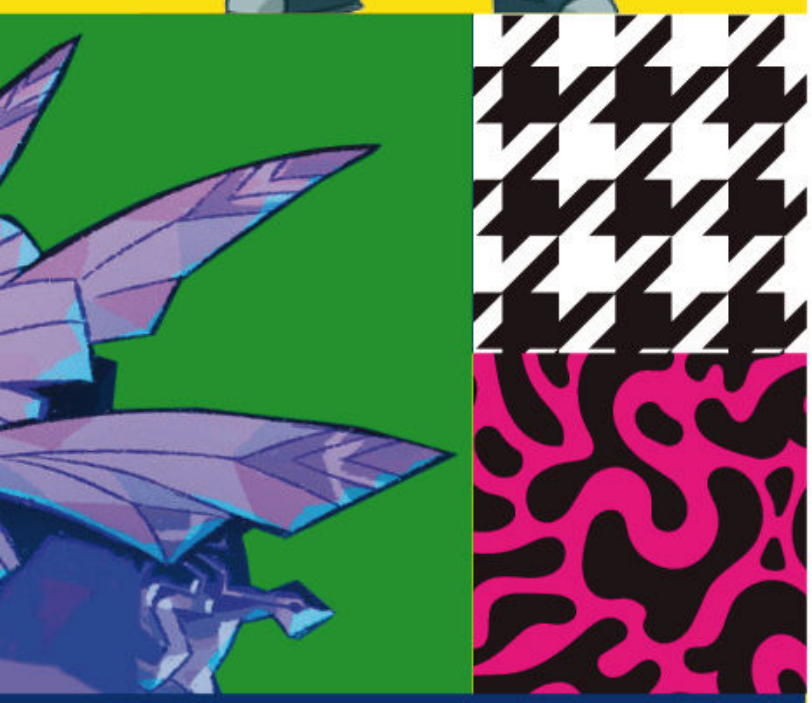
The indie devs we spoke to at the games fest

LEONARDO CASTANHO
Namesake of Little Leo Games, making *Slay the Spire*-like 'dicebuilder' *Astrea* as his first indie project.

CAMILLA SLOTFELDT
Founder & CEO of BitCake Studio, which started with VR games before making 2021's *Holodrive*.

THIAGO CANCIAN
Founder of Studio Prima Materia, and director of lobster fighter *Knights of the Deep*.

RENATA KATHERINI
Renata's not a developer, but she is an engineer and a *CS:GO* streamer and esports caster on Twitch.



in the population of 215 million Portuguese-speaking players. But it's only localised one game so far. This is one reason competitive games have found an audience in Brazil: *CS:GO*, *Valorant*, *Fortnite*, *League of Legends*, *Rainbow Six Siege*, and *Apex Legends* all support Portuguese.

FIGHTING SPIRIT

At BIG I talked to young *CS:GO* streamer Renata Katherini, who jumps on Twitch after her day job as an engineer. Despite already having a career she's interested in working full-time in esports. Those opportunities are rare in Brazil – but again, it's easy for outsiders to underestimate how big Brazil's audience is. The country contains more than 90% of the world's Portuguese speakers, and streamer Alexandre 'Gaules' Borba pulled in more than 700,000 of them simultaneously during a *CS:GO* major earlier this year. That put him in the top ten of all-time most-viewed Twitch streams, and he didn't even need Drake to do it.

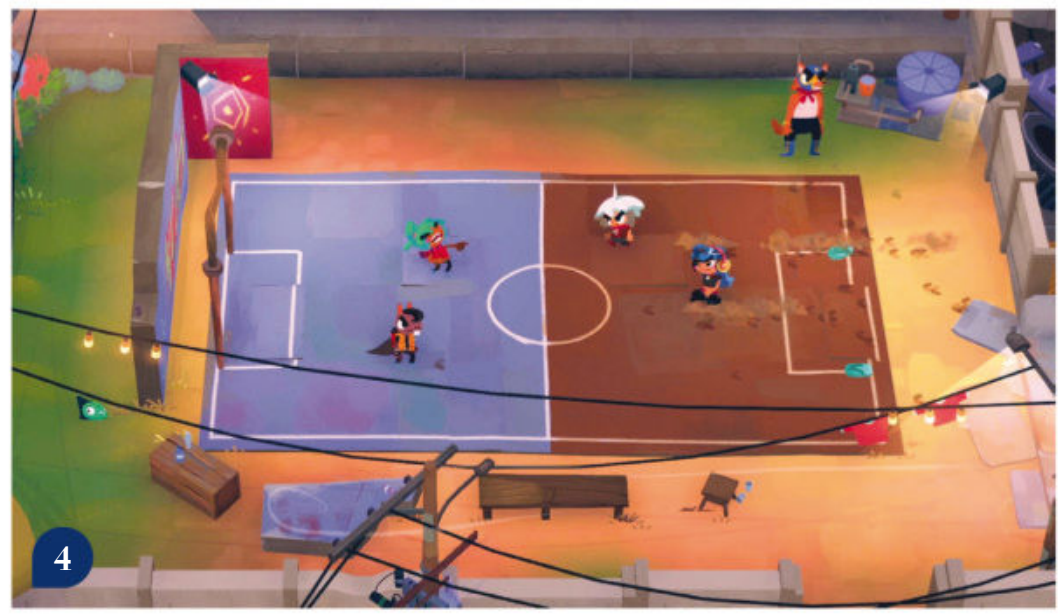
"Access to games is much easier now, so I hope younger people will be more active professionally playing games," Katherini explains. "Language is kind of a barrier for [Brazilians watching big streamers from the US and Europe], but when the action is going on, everybody speaks the same language."

Lumping every Brazilian into the esports bucket would be silly – no country made up of millions of people has such narrow tastes. But I think Brazil's gaming population is unique in that it's at once a monolith and a global minority – big enough to fill regional servers and spawn memes about their laughter, but still forced to learn English or hope a game gets a Portuguese translation. Without the money required to fund dozens of competing local esports teams, Brazilians rally around faves like MIBR like they're Olympians on the world stage. I can see how eternally being at the mercy of game studios a hemisphere away could intertwine with that national pride to create a uniquely passionate competitive audience.

"ACCESS TO GAMES IS MUCH EASIER NOW, SO I HOPE YOUNGER PEOPLE WILL BE MORE ACTIVE"

Being a PC gamer in Brazil means having a streak of that fighting spirit, whether it's playing games or making them. "Brazilians really like competitive games. And the Brazilian audience has a tendency for free games – that's just the truth. Especially with mobile, they expect games should be free. It's a different kind of gamer, really," says Slotfeldt.

"Maybe people from Brazil suffer a little more making a game," says Leonardo Castanho. "We're used to a struggle. I don't want to say we work harder than the guys in the US, but maybe when it's harder, you run after it more." ■



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Dambuster	Deep Silver	deadisland.deepsilver.com

DEAD ISLAND 2

Back from the grave... again. With a vengeance

It's all too easy to compare the continued existence of *Dead Island 2* to the zombies it features. Lurching on for years, long after it seemed dead, passed from one studio to another. In spite of the name though, *Dead Island 2* is practically a new game. According to David Stenton, when development was taken over by Dambuster in 2018 it was "built from scratch". The only thing they kept was zombies and its LA setting. "That serves the 'paradise gone to hell' pillar." Though the genre in which it sits feel like it never dies, with zombie games still releasing on the regular. What does something like *Dead Island 2* bring to the table? What even is the identity of this series?

PLAYED IT

Speaking to Stenton and James Worrall at Dambuster, as well as having 20 minutes with the game, it's clear the focus is squarely on its gnarly close quarters combat. "It was the passion for the gore, the passion for up close melee combat," Stenton explains. "And just doing that really, really well." The section of the game I played had our player character, Amy (one of six heroes for players to choose) having to venture onto the well-known Santa Monica Pier. It was a tight, linear portion in which the bright lights and amusements rides are slowly brought back on as we delve deeper, which made for a poor showcase of how the game's ambitions as an open world will fare but a good showing for the game's moment to moment fighting.

It's a spooky section, more atmospheric and subdued than the bombastic trailer might have you believe. A faint mist hangs over the city's too-damn-quiet beach, letting the red ferris wheel blaze away in the night with real foreboding. It's a very handsome looking game. "It's easy for us to build a place that people can feel is familiar," James says of the game's setting. "That then gives us that contrast with the zomb-pocalypse. It also means, they know wherever they go. Even if they've never been to Bel-Air before they know what Bel-Air looks like." The tone in *Dead Island 2* lands somewhere closer to Sam Raimi's Evil Dead series. Scary things are scary or at least grotesque while our heroes are a little larger than life, confronting horror with bravado and one liners. Amy kept shouting and swearing at zombies, goading them the way I often find myself doing.

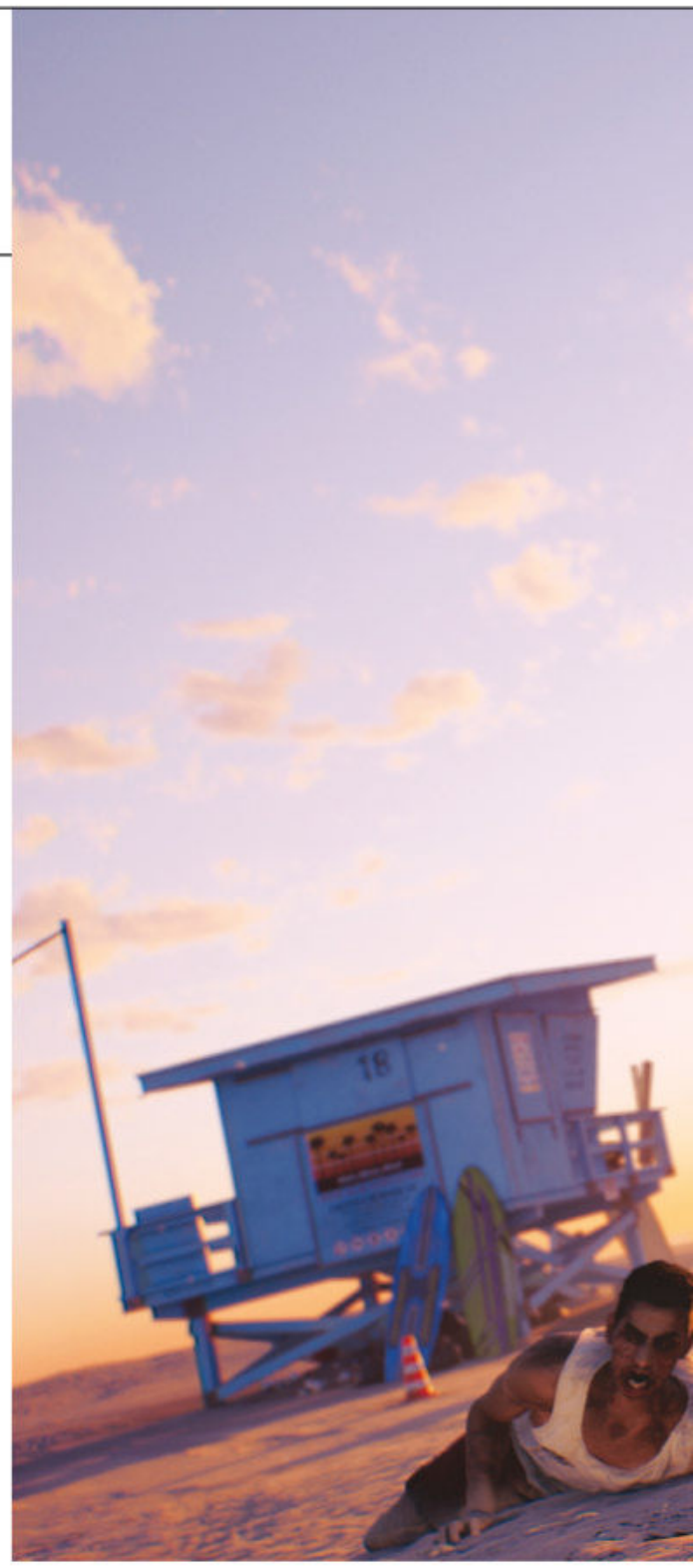
"EACH PLAYER CHARACTER HAS THEIR OWN VOICE AND THEIR OWN DIALOGUE"

BEACH AND CLEAR

While Worrall explains there is no branching narrative, the character you choose will bring their own personality to what happens. "Each player character has their own voice and their own dialogue. So you might get one character who's particularly driven or energised or upbeat. You might get another character who's a little bit more of a cynical individual. Some characters are quiet low key, subtle. We've written those characters to reflect broad playstyles." You strong, quiet types should get a little representation I'm sure. These heroes all come with their own starting stats and abilities so you'll be able to mould any of them more or less to your preferred style of zombie killing meaning a choice can largely hinge on a matching personality.

Your player characters is far from an invulnerable hero after all and all the quips in the world do little once the undead shuffle onto the scene. There's a real sense of claustrophobia as zombies gather around you since they can't be taken care of swiftly. Each individual one is a threat in its own right. In these moments the game conjures up memories of *Resident Evil 4*, making split second decisions about how to handle a group of foes. Take out a leg here, try for a headshot there. Except instead of guns, you're mostly wielding over the top melee

Dead Island 2



weapons, wrestling them back as they get stuck or embedded in rotting flesh.

A REAL EYE GORE

All that is thanks to a system for rendering zombie bodies called FLESH that stands for Fully Locational Evisceration System for Humanoids. It took a decade to create the perfect acronym but by god, they've done it. What it means is that much like the recent *Resident Evil Remake*s, zombies have an absolutely disgusting level of detail as you hack or shoot at them. It's gross and grimy, the kind of excess that makes you feel like you need a shower after playing.

Perversely, I couldn't get enough. I'm a sucker for these intimate fights and *Dead Island 2* has more in common with games like Chivalry than it does other zombie slayers. You have more than just a heavy and light attack to use and your defensive and special attacks can be swapped out, if say you'd rather have a block than a dash. There's of stats swapping too but that feels considerably less exciting. It's not earth shattering, it's just done really well and the focus on precision, actually having to aim your pokes and swings to hit specific body parts, sets it apart.

If that was it that would probably be enough but *Dead Island 2* heightens the chaos of these skirmishes with loads of interactive scenery. Sure, there's your typical explosive tanks but the game has a fluid simulation for water and fuel. The interplay of elements, is simple enough. Water conducts electricity, fuel spreads fire... you get the idea. What was cool was it feeling more dynamic than simply me remembering to bring the right resources to every fight. Having an electrified zombie wander into a crowded fight was initially a moment of panic until inspiration struck and throwing some water at their feet turned them into a weapon against all their surrounding buddies. "Ultimately, when you're the full-on zombie slayer later in the game, what you're really relying on is sort of a combat symphony," says Stenton.

CLOWNING AROUND

This demo ends with a boss encounter, a confrontation with a zombie clown who has been taunting us as we explored the pier. In a fight like this, essentially one on one, it goes from a zombie game to a more well-worn action RPG. There are phases and windows of opportunity as the clown's arms can block ranged attacks. It highlights the combat's complexity, as well as its surprising difficulty. You have a lot of moves and abilities are put at your disposal. It just comes at the expense of the situational complexity of fending off a crowd of brain eaters. It feels a lot less, and I appreciate the irony here, alive.

The presence of friends will probably help as three player co-op is confirmed for the game, however no other details were shared at this time. It's not hard to imagine how it could come together, with players specialising in different roles and abilities, bringing some RPG staple tactics to the zombie genre. With some pals in the mix, *Dead Island 2* could be a perfect game for late night sessions.

DEAD ISLAND 2 COULD BE A PERFECT GAME FOR LATE NIGHT SESSIONS

ARMY OF THE DEAD

Co-op is just another aspect among many that isn't unique to *Dead Island 2*. There is *Back 4 Blood*, *Left 4 Dead* and even *Vermintide* or *Darktide* among numerous others. We've had zany and comedic zombie games, including ones people love a whole lot like *Dead Rising*. Even LA itself has been done before in many games. *Dead Island 2* is far from novel and any hope of twists or a compelling narrative lay beyond the scope of the demo I played but still, there's certainly something intriguing in it. It presents the zombie apocalypse as something its characters are forced to live with. Its heroes are, I'm told, immune but infected, carrying the disease without turning into zombies themselves. Meaning leaving quarantined LA isn't an option. Unable to escape, our heroes are chasing momentary joys in a bleak, broken world as they fight for their lives. That might be a bit relatable to a whole bunch of people right now.

I had little to no expectations or even much interest in *Dead Island 2*. A sequel to a mediocre RPG? Yet another zombie game? While it absolutely lacks for originality, it excels in some of its execution. There's no knowing if it has an enthralling campaign to tie it all together but in its fights, the game kills and for some, great combat could be more than enough to keep an eye on this unexpected comeback.

Samantha Greer

ABOVE: *Dead Island 2* recreates famous LA locations, but will it make a compelling open world?

LEFT: There was little story in the demo, but the premise is hardly inspiring.

Homeworld 3

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2023	Blackbird Interactive	Gearbox Publishing	gearboxpublishing.com

HOMEWORLD 3

Even in space, you need to use terrain to your advantage

It's the third mission of the game, and, if this was *Homeworld 2*, I'd be screwed. Right now, I only have access to recon ships and interceptors – basic fighters that, per *Homeworld*'s rock, paper, scissors design, are weak against the bigger, meaner frigates. And I've been tasked with securing an area protected by two bigger, meaner frigates.

But I'm not playing *Homeworld 2*. I'm playing its successor, a game that Blackbird Interactive describes as being 20 years in the making. A game that takes concepts once considered back then, but dismissed because the technology of the day just wasn't up to the task. I'm playing *Homeworld 3*, a space RTS that's all about terrain.

Those frigates are guarding a small segment of a colossal, derelict ship, which acts as the battlespace for this mission. Blackbird is keen to point out that the environmental artistry that *Homeworld* is known for – the grandeur of space, its asteroid fields and derelict ships, is no longer just part of the skybox. It's now an active part of each mission.

"Terrain was a huge feature that was not able to be done at the time with the technology that was available for *Homeworld 2*," says game director Lance Mueller, "and that was part of the original vision. There was a lot of concept art brought over from *Homeworld 2* that we used to find the foundation."

This is good news for me, and bad news for the two enemy frigates, who are guarding a section of the map that's littered with panels that have broken off the derelict ship. By right-clicking on a section of this debris, my interceptors will fly up and take cover. If the missile frigates can't get line-of-sight on my ships, they're safe to continue their approach.

THOSE FRIGATES ARE GUARDING A SEGMENT OF A COLOSSAL, DERELICT SHIP

SECRET TUNNEL

And so I continue, moving closer until finally I'm in range. But rather than send my visible but covered squad into a close range suicide attack, I instead unleash my second surprise. While the frigates have been attempting to get a lock on my squad of well-protected interceptors, my main squad was hiding underneath – in a tunnel running through what would have been the derelict ship's engines.

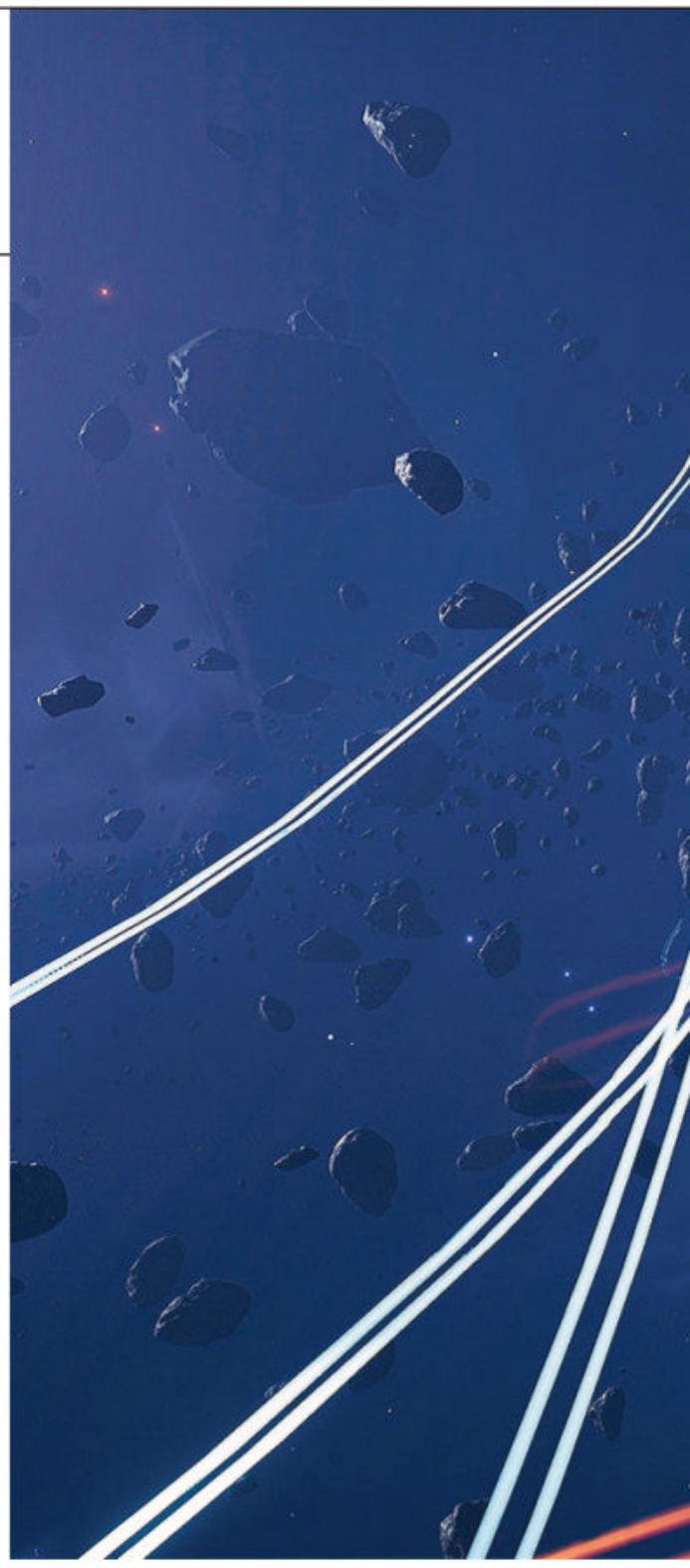
Tunnels like this provide a route between two points that block line-of-sight, meaning they're perfect for flanking manoeuvres and ambushes. My squad surprises the frigates as they fire pointlessly at a target they can't hit. I take some losses – they're still just interceptors – but come out far better off than I would've in open space.

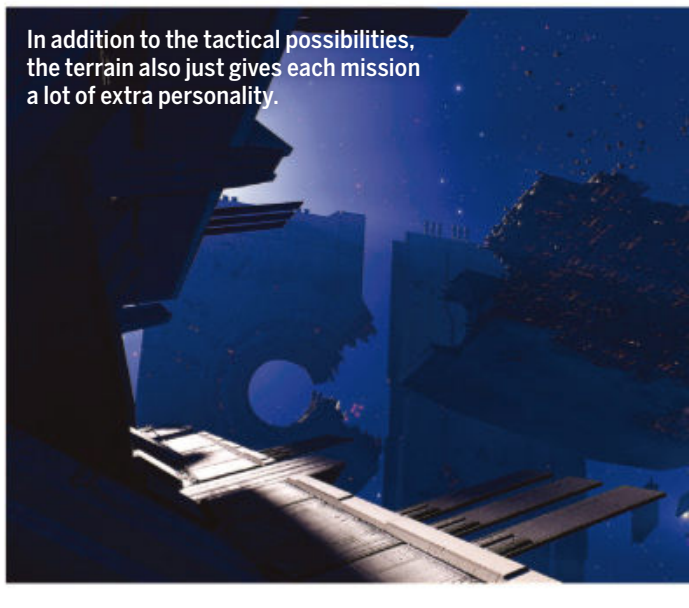
PLAYED IT

"The convenient cover in mission three is to set up the hard counters and soft counters of the game," says Mueller. "Terrain is supposed to be more of a creator of soft counters. In previous *Homeworld*s, if you brought a bunch of fighters against a bunch of frigates, there's nothing to stop them from just launching all of their weapons at you. Now you're able to move your fighters and use the terrain and get on top of something, which now means you've increased that time to kill, so that you don't die before you get there."

The irony of *Homeworld 3* is that it does feel like a Relic RTS – a more modern one from the post-*Company of Heroes* era. The use of terrain gives it a strong flavour of modern RTS design, even while it retains the design philosophy – and the vibes – that built its legacy as a cult classic of the genre. I'm eager to see how these elements play out in a more organic way, in a mission where they aren't being so clearly tutorialised to the player. But if done right, *Homeworld 3* should be a meaningful progression of the series – one that almost justifies that 20 year wait.

Phil Savage





In addition to the tactical possibilities, the terrain also just gives each mission a lot of extra personality.

ABOVE: That's some good-looking space combat.

LEFT: Clever tactics can subvert the rock, paper, scissors nature of the combat.

The Callisto Protocol

ABOVE: They may look like zombies – but the mutants are still intelligent.

RIGHT: When was the last time this place saw a mop?

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
December 2	Striking Distance Studios	KRAFTON	callisto.sds.com

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

A gloriously gory spiritual successor to *Dead Space*

Five seconds into my demo of The *Callisto Protocol* and I'm already slapped with a (very successful) jump scare. A mutant appears from nowhere, tentacles brutally ripping out of its chest as it lets out a blood-curdling scream. Protagonist Jacob hesitates, and the tentacles slosh back into its body. But that's no sign of safety. It morphs, in an unsettlingly believable way, growing larger, badder, and a whole lot scarier.

Developer Striking Distance want to keep you on your toes. The team pulled inspiration from *Alien Isolation*'s stalking antagonist to ensure you almost never feel safe. "Things track you in our game, the grunts sometimes find a way," chief technical officer Mark James tells me. "They don't always attack you, they'll move into a grate and you'll hear them around you, and they'll pop up in another grate somewhere else where there's a better attack spot for them. So they're looking for spaces in which they can actually make the jump happen, rather than just attacking."

It generates a lot of tension, and that's noticeable throughout our demonstration. When Jacob strikes a mutant with his stun baton, he feels panicked and desperate, not like a triumphant action hero.

DEAD GOOD

He can also stomp on his foes in a way very reminiscent of *Dead Space*. It makes sense, with Glen Schofield being the original creator of that series and the lead on this one. James tells me there's "a lot more characterisation, a lot more story" to be found here though, and it appears to be true. Jacob mutters to himself and reacts to the environment around him, verbalising my own anxieties as he goes.

It surprised me, then, to see him lift a mutant into the air with a superpowered wrist grip and toss him into a crusher like a limp noodle. All of the frightened tentacle bashing in the run up to this suddenly felt a little unnecessary when there was the potential for him dispatch a mutant like he was binning a banana peel. Striking Distance has done its best to ensure that powers don't automatically turn the game into easy mode, though.

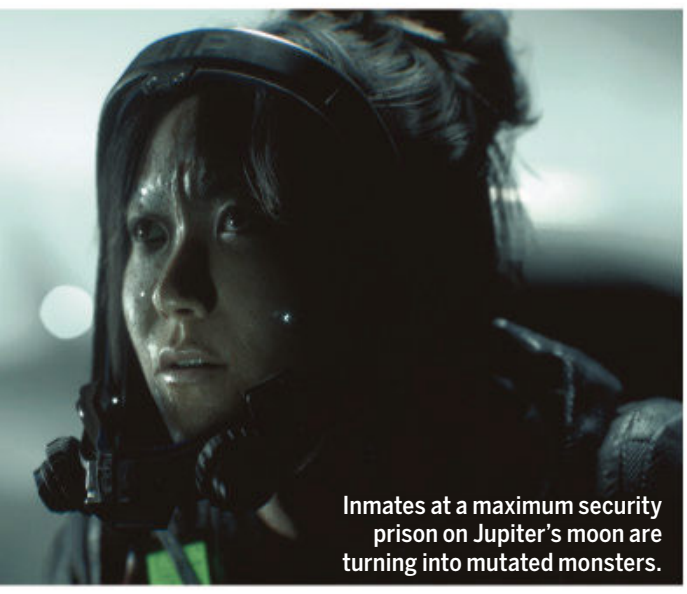
All weapons have branching upgrades that are created and attached with 3D printers dotted around Callisto's prison. A maxed-out power grip can be a great way to quickly get out of combat situations, but it's not something that can be relied upon constantly. The mutant humans aren't punching bags that can be easily cheesed – they learn. Hit a big guy with the baton enough times and they'll start to stand defensively, arms crossed in front of them to block oncoming attacks. They'll protect limbs or other parts of the body where the virus is taking hold. "We've got these intelligent moments," James told me. "That was one of the things we really focused on early on, the idea of intelligent opponents and adaptable opponents."

NEW INFO

Not only are the opponents intelligent, they're also frighteningly grounded in reality and the prison environment around them. "They're not zombies, they're not aliens, they are mutated humans," James says. "We look at how the body mutates naturally." Even when there's an unhinged jaw, tentacles, or boils blistering along the body, the game does a surprisingly good job of reminding you that these people were once the prisoners and guards that walked Callisto's halls.

As the gameplay demo wraps up, Jacob is thrust down terrifyingly fast pipes, fans whirring at an ungodly speed. He avoids them for a little while, before getting clipped, pushed against the wall, and split in half by the blades. I'm not much of a horror fan, but even I leave this gory display keen to see more.

Mollie Taylor



Inmates at a maximum security prison on Jupiter's moon are turning into mutated monsters.

THE MUTANT HUMANS AREN'T PUNCHING BAGS THAT CAN BE EASILY CHEESED – THEY LEARN

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Haemimont Games	THQ Nordic	jaggedalliance.com

JAGGED ALLIANCE 3

Escaping the spectre of *XCOM* by never telling you the odds

It's hard to overstate just how important Firaxis' *XCOM* reboot was. In the years since its release, the turn-based strategy genre has experienced a renaissance that owe a huge debt to Firaxis' clever mix of old and new. But what if you're trying to make the successor to a different turn-based classic? Then, it seems, *XCOM*'s legacy can be a hindrance.

"We found that, no matter what we did, everyone played just like they played all the other games like *XCOM*," says Brad Logston, senior producer for *Jagged Alliance 3*. "They weren't playing it like *Jagged Alliance*. We didn't even know how to fix it. We were doing things like tweaking AI, tweaking weapon damage ranges, all these different things. Nothing was really working."

The solution may seem small, but it's had an oversized effect on how the game plays. "One of our combat systems designers proposed, 'You know, this may be crazy – and people are gonna kill us – but what if we just remove chance-to-hit and see how that works.' Once we did, everything shifted. Before, if someone had a 75% chance shot, they wouldn't take it. They'd hold back. Once we removed chance-to-hit, they start experimenting. It also meant we could make the AI more fluid. They could try things, they could be a little sloppy during play."

Some of my favourite turn-based games of this new era are ones that give the player an overabundance of information – like *Into the Breach* or *Invisible, Inc*. But here, Haemimont Games has discovered something that gets to the essence of what made the early *Jagged Alliance*'s mix of turn-based combat and RPG-lite management so good. These are not games about responding perfectly to the situation – they're about adapting to the unexpected.

"It's not just chance-to-hit," says Logston. "Even things like weapon jam chance, or grenade fumble chance are hidden. I've had situations where I've been on the second story of a building, fumbled a grenade, and blown up the floor beneath me. All the mercs fell down one floor, took fall damage and were stunned for a turn."

IN THE JUNGLE, DURING HEAVY RAIN, VISIBILITY IS LOWERED, BUT SO TOO IS SOUND

HEAVY RAIN

The *Jagged Alliance* series has reemerged a few times in the last couple of decades, but never in a way that did justice to the spirit and depth of the first two games. But here, it feels like Haemimont wants to get it right. Its African setting features extreme weather effects that will change the combat simulation – in the jungle, during heavy rain, visibility is lowered, but so too is sound, giving your mercs an opportunity to exploit.

NEW INFO

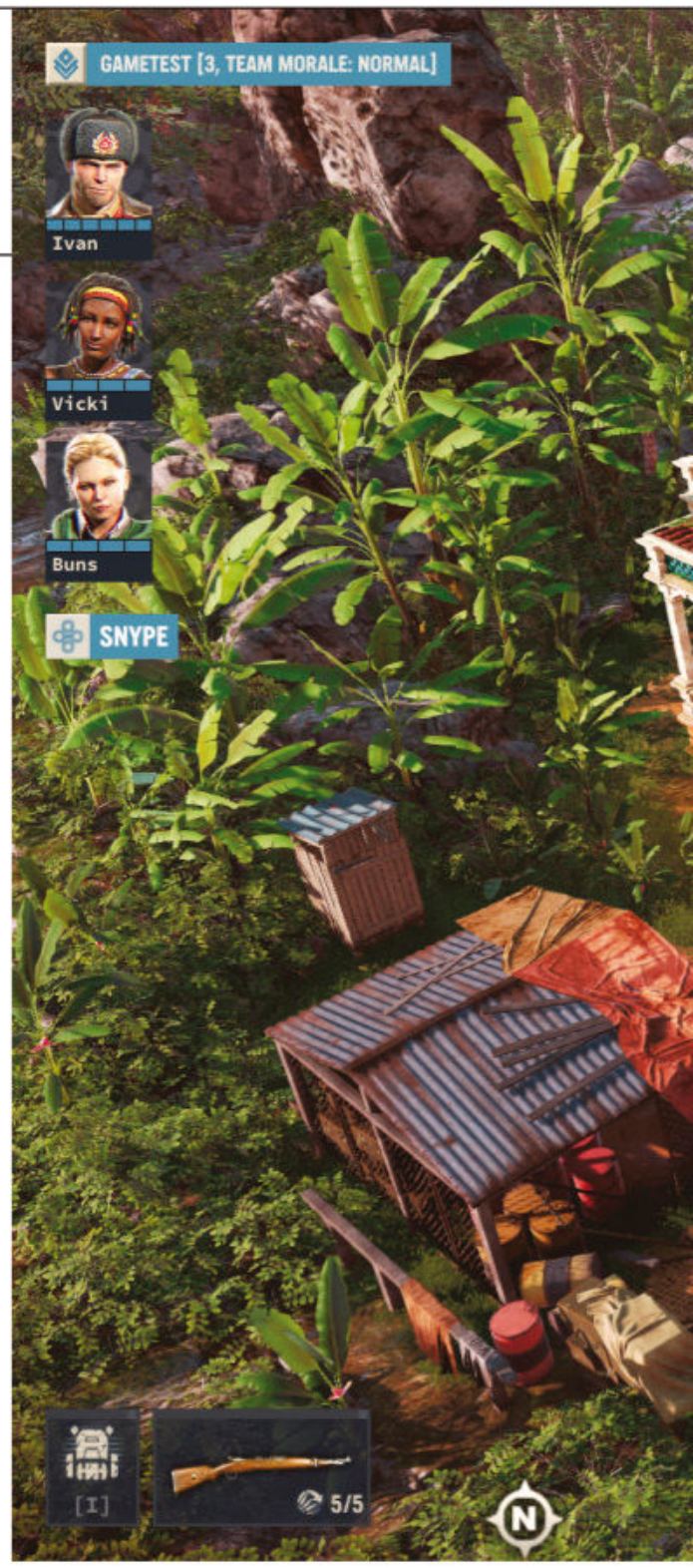
Its roster of 40 mercs are all fully voiced, with personalities that may clash against each other. The strategy layer is classic *Jagged Alliance*: a dynamic map that tracks and simulates both the missions you deploy your mercs on, and the enemy force's attempts to retake what was once theirs.

But the real sign of Haemimont's commitment is that one seemingly small decision to upend the conventions that *XCOM* laid down. It would have been easy to make another *XCOM*-like, but it wouldn't have been *Jagged Alliance*.

"Where we had it before, it was just *XCOM*," says Logston. "And we were like, 'Well, are we just cloning what someone else has already done?' That doesn't make us special. We had to find how to bring that *Jagged Alliance* experience back."

Perhaps the bigger question then, is whether people want a departure from the systems that have come to define the genre. Is there a place for *Jagged Alliance* in this turn-based renaissance? As someone who loved the borderline chaos of those early games, I really hope there is.

Phil Savage



The setting certainly feels true to classic *Jagged Alliance* so far.

ABOVE: Build a mercenary crew of colourful characters from around the world.

LEFT: Intel discovered in missions can point you towards new opportunities and sidequests.

Minecraft Legends

A familiar world but in an oddly different art style.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2023	Mojang Studios	Xbox Game Studios	minecraft.net

MINECRAFT LEGENDS

A strategy spin-off that gives *Minecraft* a whole new scale

This is a strange one – I'm not totally convinced by *Minecraft Legends* yet. Perhaps it's the odd cel-shaded art style, or my own inexperience with strategy games. It's very obviously *Minecraft*, but at the same time feels quite a bit alien – like a sort of genre uncanny valley.

NEW INFO

It's not as if the series has struggled to contort itself to genres outside of survival before. *Minecraft Dungeons* did reasonably well for itself, even if it didn't work for me, and I had a great time with Telltale's narrative-driven *Minecraft Story Mode*. Perhaps it's because I'm watching someone playing rather than navigating it myself, but it's hard to get a feel for how it'll work as a strategy game.

Where standard *Minecraft* thinks block by block, *Legends* zooms out, thinking in chunks or 'thoughts' as I'm repeatedly told during the demo. Gathering wood isn't done by slowly punching down trees, but by sending out small flying minions who're capable of deforesting entire areas in minutes. Journeying across the procedurally generated map doesn't have to be meticulously performed with one-block jumps and careful climbing. Instead, I watch as the main character, mounted on a horse, practically levitates up entire blocks on a mountain to get a better view of the piglin fortress he's about to launch an attack upon.

ATTACK THE BLOCK

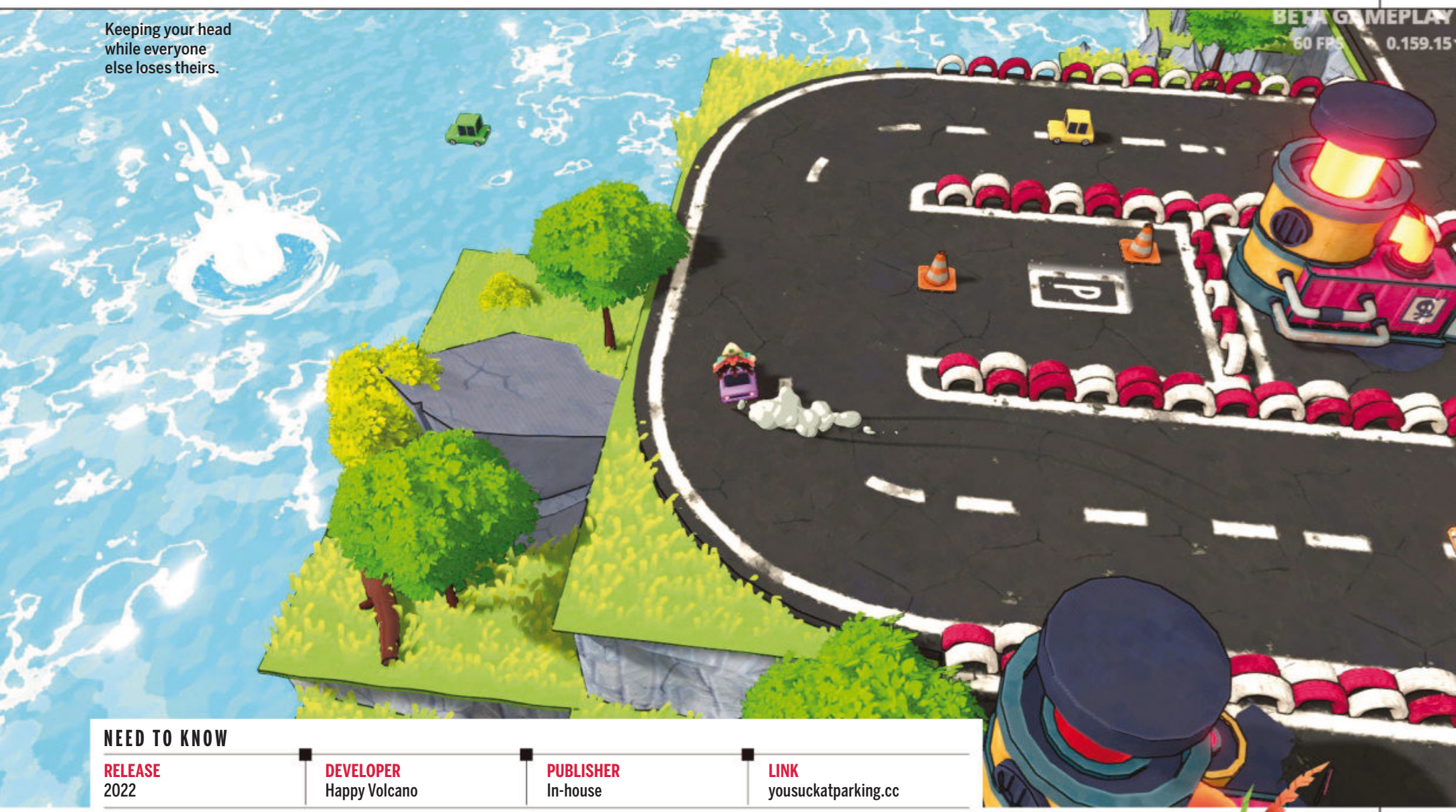
Suddenly, a giant tower gets erected on top of the vantage point. Various spawners are placed down with speed, featuring recognisable mobs like golems ready to send into battle. While *Minecraft Legends* forgoes some creativity in removing the ability to create grand structures block by block, I'm told much of the expression comes instead in your placement of these pre-defined buildings, slowly creating grand fortresses of your own to compete against the piglin armies.

SUDDENLY, A GIANT TOWER GETS ERECTED ON TOP OF THE VANTAGE POINT

The piglin fortress I'm shown is one of many that'll be encountered throughout the campaign, called hordes. This one, the horde of the bastion, focuses on a strong defence. As the hero's own base is being built and troops spawned, the bastion is being scoured for an entry point. One is found, and battle begins.

I'm still struggling to grapple with the soup of ideas and tweaked art style, but I can't help but find myself drawn in by the *Minecraft*yness of it all. It's still got that goofy charm, and I'm told the focus is on trying to make this game feel like a fairytale, which I can see a glimpse of during this preview. If there's anything that'll get me into strategy, it'll be *Minecraft*. I'm dying to see a little bit more in the hopes it'll put my uncertainties to rest. Maybe this could be the start of a beautiful relationship with the genre.

Mollie Taylor



Keeping your head while everyone else loses theirs.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2022	Happy Volcano	In-house	yousuckatparking.cc

YOU SUCK AT PARKING

A driving game where your objective is to stop

I'm not great at parking in real life, because I'm paranoid about hitting other cars. Here is a game where you'd fail your parallel parking test because a giant magnet threw you into a laser barrier, or the sea, which isn't something I've had to worry my insurers with. Yet.

PLAYED IT

You Suck at Parking is a simple blend of isometric racer and, well, parking, but not as you know it. Drive your tiny but clearly overpowered car round a treacherous *Trackmania*-style circuit of obstacles against the clock and with dwindling amounts of petrol, before trying to leave your car in the general vicinity of the marked bays.

Handling much like a fairground bumper car, each turn is likely to become a doughnut spin, but critically there's no reverse gear at the end of it. The catch here is, once you stop, you've parked and that's it. That run is over. Never mind, your next car is just a quick reset away. Just don't hit your old wreck on this fresh run. Eventually time catches up with you, and the game gets to declare that you rock or, more likely, actually suck at parking some cars.

SQUEE POINT TURN

Even if you're confounded by one track, you're encouraged on to the next one, so you never really feel stuck on anything. There are always more tracks, more spaces, more mines, more giant fans and house-sized boxing gloves to challenge you. You will have to circle back eventually to complete the levels if you want to progress to the next hub-island, but that never felt unfair or arduous. Instead, I spent most of the game

I SPENT MOST OF THE GAME GIGGLING OR SWEARING HAPPILY AT THE SAME THINGS

giggling or swearing happily at the same things depending on how many times I'd tried to do them. I even figured out the magnets eventually. The biggest challenge was using consistent controls to steer a car that constantly changes direction, like the fastest RC car you've ever tried. I wouldn't have minded a scheme where left was always left, but maybe that would be too easy.

This being a beta build, the multiplayer is, as yet, deserted, but it's clear they're hoping for the chaotic and sharable fun of *Fall Guys* and its ilk. There are hats and custom explosions, for one thing. You get a little view on this with the '*Frogger*' level and those with other non-player cars busily getting in your way, before flinging themselves, lemming-like, to their deaths. In singleplayer, you can push your own car out of an occupied parking space by accident, and I imagine that's where most of the fun/griefing will be had in the arena. I suspect it'll all be too frantic to be a good spectator sport, but time will tell. Maybe I just suck at parking.

Matt Killeen

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
October 26	Paradox	In-house	paradoxinteractive.com

VICTORIA 3

Creating utopias and dystopias by gaslight

The year is 1881 and I've turned the islands of Hawaii into an anarchist paradise that long ago disposed of the king. Our industries are modest, but they are all owned by the workers, giving us one of the highest standards of living in the world. For the most part, we did this without firing a shot.

Victoria 3 is, even more than its 2011 predecessor, a grand strategy game about shaping a society. Covering the years from 1836 to 1936 on a detailed world map, it models every single individual person alive at the time. That might sound absurd, but it's not an exaggeration. They're organised by culture, religion, and profession into groups called 'pops' that all get their own 3D portraits, but when you see that there are 4,361 Anglo-Canadian Protestant Machinists in Saskatchewan, that's not an abstracted figure. The Clausewitz engine is keeping track of all of those people, from their birth rate to literacy level to political preferences.

If characters are the core of *Crusader Kings III*, pops are the core of *Victoria 3*. Not only do you need them to plough your fields, fight your wars, and work in your textile mills, they exert their influence on the political balance of your nation. At least, the educated ones do. And as the 1800s roll on, more and more of the lower and middle classes will become politically active. You can certainly try to slow that down by passing draconian censorship laws and making schools only available to the wealthy, but as a certain Romanov learned in real life, you hold back the tide of history at your own peril.

MORE OF THE LOWER AND MIDDLE CLASSES WILL BECOME POLITICALLY ACTIVE

Working with or against the popular will to build your ideal society is one major half of the central gameplay. Early on, most countries are controlled by powerful landowners who exert the lion's share of the influence by simply having the most money. There are multiple sources of political clout, but even in a pure democracy, cold hard cash will always be one factor. There is a lot you can do to nudge things in a more egalitarian direction, perhaps starting with extending the vote to all landowners, then to the heads of households, then to all adult men and eventually to women. Moving people out of the fields and into the factories changes the equation, too. This will slowly erode the power of the old aristocracy. But they will fight these laws every step of the way to preserve their interests, and they may even start a civil war if you try to pass too many reforms too quickly. And their every economic loss is often a gain for the rising capitalist tycoons.

PLAYED IT

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

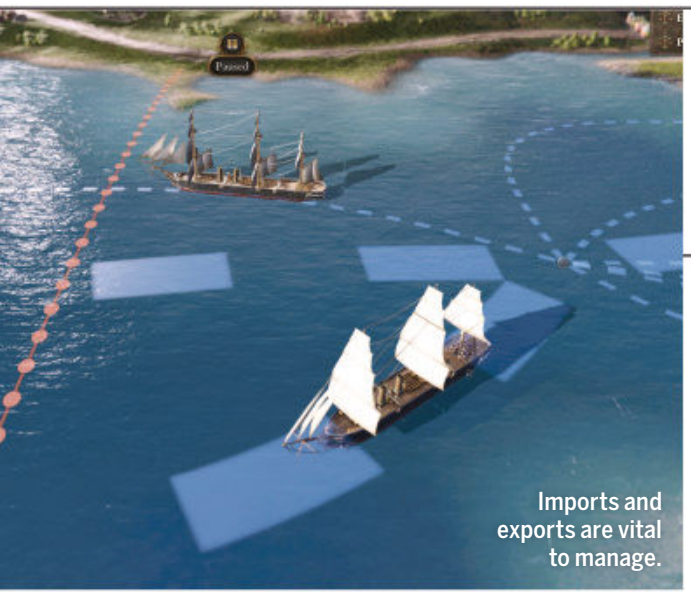
In this way, the main antagonists you have to struggle with are often within your own borders. Of the five or six campaigns I played, in only one did I get majorly involved in foreign wars. And it's perfectly possible to avoid international entanglements and still have an exciting run full of drama, conflict, and intrigue. I have often tried to play Paradox's other games without going to war, but *Victoria 3* seems specifically built for it. When you try to pass a law, like establishing public schools, everyone who doesn't like the change will try to stall it. And if they're fed up enough, perhaps because you also made them start paying for a national health system and set up a minimum wage, they might attempt to violently overthrow the government.

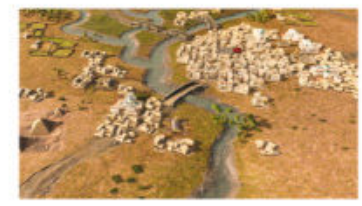
The strength of such a revolt is based on how much power the opposition still holds, so there's a delicate dance of sneaking through moderate reforms that will gradually weaken the old guard before you push for anything more drastic. Trying to go straight from an absolute monarchy to a parliamentary republic in 1836 is a recipe for disaster. But if instead you start

Victoria 3

RIGHT: It's not about painting the map your colour in this one.

BELOW: Warfare is pretty simple and abstract compared to economy and politics.


Imports and exports are vital to manage.



by abolishing levies, setting up a standing army, and allowing propertied men to elect representatives who at least nominally serve at the pleasure of the king, their base of power can die a death by a thousand cuts, eventually rendering their protests mostly toothless.

Certain types of pops are more likely to support certain interest groups, such as aristocrats mostly throwing in their lot with the landowners, and each interest group has a set of traits that determine which policies they support and oppose. A paternalistic interest group, for instance, scoffs at the idea of women being equal to men and prefers a strong guiding hand on the tiller of government. These preferences can also be influenced by characters, as well. Every interest group has a leader with an ideology of their own. The trade unions may start out relatively moderate, but as new ideas spread within your borders, they may come to be led by a socialist or a feminist leader pushing for more radical changes. It's certainly possible to try and keep a very conservative monarchy until the endgame, but it becomes increasingly harder to do as more people become literate and distant universities spread ideas like egalitarianism and anarchism.

WORKSHOPS OF THE WORLD

The other reason it's a hindrance to stay rooted in the past is that you'll fall behind in the second major arena of *Victoria 3*: the Industrial Revolution. As your campaign opens, most people in the world are illiterate peasant farmers working in subsistence agriculture. It's a state of affairs that pleases and benefits the aristocracy, but leaves little room to grow your economy with the many inventions that will come about in the next 100 years.

Taking advantage of these modern marvels will require you to build schools and universities, teaching your peasants how to become machinists and engineers, as well as building coal mines, steel mills, and shipyards. There are dozens of basic, luxury, and industrial goods that all have dynamic prices based on supply and demand within your country's market, which may include multiple sovereign states via a customs union. Producing or importing more of any given resource lowers the price, which will also improve the standard of living for all of your pops as they can afford more on the same salary. More supply also makes your domestic industries producing those goods less profitable though, which may lead to the workers in certain factories becoming poorer or being laid off.

AT THE BEGINNING, ONLY THE VERY WEALTHY WILL EXPECT TO HAVE NICE THINGS

At the beginning, only the very wealthy will expect to have nice things like wine and luxury furniture. But as the lower classes become more literate, and especially if they hear about this new craze called socialism, the minimum standard of living they expect to maintain will continue to rise. A factory labourer in 1920 might be significantly richer than his great-great-grandfather who was a farmhand in 1840, but he won't be content with his lot in life as he's read enough to understand how the system is rigged in favour of the rich, which may lead him to become a radical and demand reforms like a minimum wage or workplace safety regulations. The industrialists who own the factories will oppose this. It's a very direct way of modelling the causes of class conflict, and one that ultimately works better and feels more authentic than *Victoria 2*'s abstract 'consciousness' system.

DRUMS OF WAR

That isn't to say you can't play this as a conquest-heavy map-painting game. It's just not the default. And war plays out much differently than in other grand strategy games, as you don't actually move units around manually. Rather, you assign generals to fronts, and give them an order to attack, defend, or stand by. The war will then play out mostly on auto-pilot, with most of your ability to influence things driven by keeping your arms industries churning, inventing new methods of warfare like aerial reconnaissance and early tanks, and reforming your army to better meet your needs. It's definitely not the strongest plank of *Victoria 3*, but it does the job.

Overall, *Victoria 3* is breathtakingly ambitious and not quite like anything that came before it. There are some places where it becomes cumbersome due to the complexity of the simulation, particularly when it comes to the economy. But I could hardly drag myself away to do anything else for the ten days I got to play it, and I look forward to many more revolutions to come when it releases on October 26.

Leana Hafer

By Samantha Greer

FIRST LOOK

WYRDSONG

A mysterious new RPG with serious pedigree

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Something Wicked Games	In-house	bit.ly/3Q5iKeu

This open world RPG comes from former Bethesda and Obsidian developers, veterans of *Skyrim* and *New Vegas*. While there's little to go on save an animated trailer, we know it's set in a "fictionalised medieval Portugal". Studio founder Jeff Gardiner says the game was inspired by a trip to the country just before the COVID pandemic, and cites everything from alternate history fiction to *Elden Ring* as an influence. We'll have a while to wait before we see the results of that mix, however, as the game is still in early pre-production at this stage.

The Expanse

RELEASE Summer 2023 | DEV Telltale Games, Deck Nine

Our favourite badass pansexual polyamarous space pirate is coming to videogame land thanks to this Telltale prequel series, which will explores Camina Drummer's life before the events of sci-fi TV series The Expanse. Getting actress Cara Gee involved is exciting since her performance is so much of what people love about the character, but also casting you as a desperate scavenger, poking around spooky derelicts, sounds great on its own. Deck Nine has done well in recent years with *Life Is Strange*: *Before The Storm* and *True Colours*, here's hoping this is another winner.

Where Winds Meet

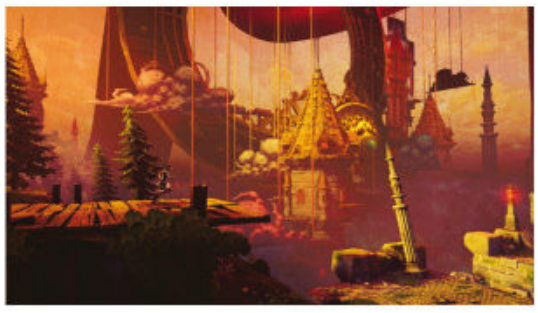
RELEASED TBC | DEV Everstone

This gorgeous Chinese open world action game takes cues from Wuxia cinema like Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, though I also see shades of Zhang Yimou's Shadow. That means players will employ martial arts with a hint of supernatural powers, including running gracefully across water or gliding through the air. It's a genre basically untouched in videogames, so *Where Winds Meet* feels like it's been a long time coming. It's not all action though: the developers say that you'll be able to learn trades like medicine and practice as a doctor, if you'd prefer to lead a peaceful life.

Rift of the Necrodancer

RELEASED TBC | DEV Brace Yourself Games, Tic Toc Games

After the delightful *Crypt of the Necrodancer* and *Cadence of Hyrule*, developer Brace Yourself is now back with a new rhythm game. This one takes the action to a modern setting, and while there's still the promise of it being an RPG battler, it's presented in more traditional rhythm game form than the dungeon crawling format that defined *Crypt*, with a *Guitar Hero*-like scrolling road of notes to hit. It certainly still boasts the easy charm and catchy music of its predecessors, and mini-games including rhythm-based yoga look like they'll inject plenty of silly fun.



Phantom Hellcat

RELEASE TBC | **DEV** Ironbird Creations

While it's stylistically distinct (though equally colourful), favouring pop beats in an otherworldy opera house, this 2D-3D hybrid action game reminds me of the outlandish *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron*. Switching perspectives, altering the scenery. The game treats its world like a stage to be decorated as befits the scene. You play as Jolene, armed with a sword, hellbent on rescuing her mother from a supernatural theatre. It's a fun premise but there's tough competition in the character action genre – here's hoping this contender can hold its own.

The Great War: Western Front

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Petroglyph Games

This RTS puts players in command of either the Allied Nations or Central Powers as they battle over Europe during the First World War. Play time is split between turn-based decision-making and real-time fights, with battlefields deteriorating the more they're fought over and weather playing a major role. It comes from the developer of the well-received *Command & Conquer Remastered*, and even features music from C&C original composer Frank Klepacki. Though, er, I'd imagine this'll have a rather more serious tone than that series.

Lies of P

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Neowiz Games, Round 8 Studio

It's hard to see past the pitch of 'gritty Pinnochio by way of *Bloodborne*', especially when the influence of From Software's game is so obvious in motion. Yet, to its credit, there's certainly some imagination on display in its steampunk machine enemies, heavy metal puppets who spray thick oil in place of red gore. The boy himself isn't made of wood, he just has a mechanical arm, but a talking lantern appears to be a hint of Jiminy Cricket, who in spite of the grim setting is as chirpy as ever. *Lies of P* is a bizarre mix, but I can't deny it looks super slick in action.

WARHAMMER 40,000: ROGUE TRADER

This is a real turn for the Matt Allwright series

NEW INFO

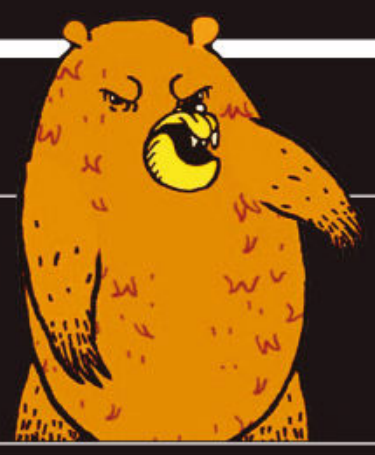
With CRPGs in a renaissance over the last few years, there couldn't be a better time for Warhammer 40K to enter the genre. You're cast as the titular rogue trader, a merchant given special dispensation to forge out into the galaxy in search of profit and adventure. As you go, you'll build an eclectic party, including a Space Marine and an Aeldari Ranger, so you should get a real taste of the universe while you chat and fight your way across it. In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war... and dialogue choices.

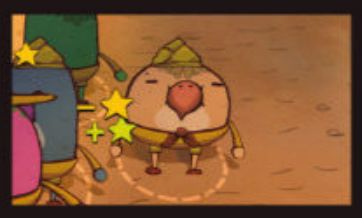
RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Owlcat Games	In-house	bit.ly/3qdMBHn

Camp Canyonwood

ABOVE: Singing songs around the campfire is a must.

RIGHT: Jack might be nightmarish, but his services can help you out.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
$28.95	Deli Interactive LLC	Graffiti Games	graffitigames.com

CAMP CANYONWOOD

Make sure your kids have fun in this management game

Every summer I tell myself that this is the year I'll get out more and maybe touch some grass in interesting places, and yet every summer I run out of time and feel that slight melancholy of not meeting expectations. Thankfully *Camp Canyonwood* has hit Early Access and I can experience the (hopeful) joys of endless summers until I've finally met my wilderness goals.

You play as a new camp counsellor who has been brought in to work on a rotting campsite and look after a group of children by making sure they have fun so you can get paid at the end of it. Teach them to fish, catch bugs and forage so they can earn badges and hopefully leave your camp a good review. As you progress you'll be able to upgrade tents into cabins and decorate the area to improve your ratings. However, camping in the woods isn't that easy – there are bees, bears and UFO abductions to deal with.

NATURE CALLS

It's all very cute with a gently sinister *Don't Starve* vibe. It's all about managing the campers by directing them to do different activities and slowly building up your surroundings by adding things like fences to make things safer or statues to make it prettier. Each kid left in your care has their own interests to cater to and you'll have to work hard to keep them entertained as well as safe. There's a lot to keep track of, like making sure the children have something to eat and also that they're not being eaten by mosquitoes or anything worse.

THE CAMP ITSELF IS SET IN A FOREST FILLED WITH INSECTS AND CREATURES

The camp itself is set in a forest filled with insects and creatures. You'll often spot butterflies, snails, squirrels and raccoons scurrying around on your hikes in the wilderness. Small lakes bordered by pines make for enticing fishing spots and if you're feeling adventurous you'll find a desert to the south of the camp full of minerals to collect. But it's not all fresh air and pretty waterfalls, there are also venomous snakes that will send your campers into a panic and a rather austere Area 51-like fenced off area at the bottom of the map. You can take your charges out on nighttime strolls to gaze at the stars if you like, but if you see strange lights in the sky and one of your kids gets abducted their parents won't want to pay you for your time, no matter if they were having fun up until that point.

Unfortunately it's not exactly clear what you're supposed to do with your time, so I spent the first few days of camp ushering the kids around while they complained constantly about how bored they were. Eventually I got so annoyed by them I disbanded the group and left them to their own devices. It turns out that's exactly what you should be doing so the kids can have some freedom away from boring grown-ups. However, just like real children, they can be little shits. If you leave them alone they'll start bullying each other or hurt themselves – you need to strike a balance between keeping them close and out of trouble, and letting them roams.

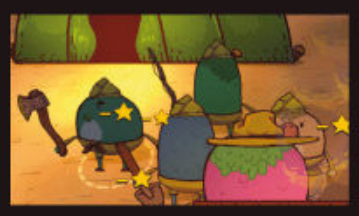
PLAYED IT

Also just like real kids, they are constantly under your feet. Interacting with the thing you want can be tough if one of your urchins stands right next to it – I want to go in this door, not speak to you about your utterly stupid hobbies Neville, GO AWAY! Directing one nipper to do a specific thing, like chop wood, can also be tricky as often another child will wander over and enter your circle of influence to do the task instead. Hopefully it'll be easier to direct them by the time the full release comes out.

TOP MARKS

To get a good review (and a nice stockpile of cash) at the end of summer you'll need to help the sprogs earn badges like a

Camp Canyonwood



proper little Scout. Some are easy to earn like foraging or hiking which you'll earn by walking around and directing them to plants to pick at. You can also give them tools to get them to chop wood, fish or mine rocks, but the camp is in such a sorry state that you'll have to buy them the tools to do so first. They'll pick things up on their own, like trash, and also do things like make friendship bracelets (also like trash) so you'll have to check in with them often to take useful materials from them and make sure they've packed a bit of grilled fish or fruit to munch on when their energy drops.

Each of the activities involves holding down an interaction button down which currently feels rather simplistic. The internet loves a good fishing minigame, but there's nothing like that here to keep gameplay feeling varied, instead you'll have your hands full just keeping an eye on the kids. Hopefully that's something that will change with further development time. Luckily there's still plenty to discover just from walking around and there are hints to a greater mystery involving the previous camp counsellor to be found on your travels.

DAILY ROUTINE

Eventually I fell into a rhythm of waking the campers up with a morning bugle call followed by foraging for fish or berries for breakfast. A daily hike is a good way to earn badges and then letting them roam until one of them inevitably ends up starting a fight with another one and needs to be picked up to calm them down. Eventually it's time for stories by the fire, followed by a terrifying nightly ritual of being visited by a skeleton in a suit called Jack. Just like real camp! Thankfully this one only looks scary and actually offers a very useful trade service to help you expand your inventory.

It also took me until day six to realise that I could sell things to make a little extra cash by bringing them to a dingy camper van in the desert area below the campsite – something that will make the first week much easier. I also have no idea what most of the materials you stumble across are for. There are a lot of flower and rock varieties as well as mysterious things like ghost ectoplasm to be found. Some things you can trade in to the other counsellors to unlock more upgrade options, but I have absolutely no idea if I should be holding onto everything I find to use later or if it's safe to sell.

The buying, trading and selling aspect of the game also needs some work. Finding resources to unlock new amenities makes sense, but at the moment it just amounts to basic fetch quests – collect logs to unlock access to more tools, pick of trash to get bigger tents – there's no sense of gathering things to help actually build the camp. Being able to customise the site is one of the main draws for a game like this, but it feels like such slow going to unlock what you need to get to that point.

You can buy things from the other counsellors, such as marshmallows for evenings at the fireside from Pam the cook, and plasters from the nurse, but you can't sell anything to them to make life easier – only Hooper in the desert will buy anything from you. A few tweaks to make selling things easier and pointers to help understand what each item is worth would go a long way. Leaving players to discover things for themselves is fine for bigger story mysteries, but it is terribly frustrating for basic mechanics.

HAPPY CAMPERS

It's still very Early Access – there's not much variety in what you can do and a few bugs left me stuck in a lake or in a doorway. The opening week is also a real slog so a bit of refinement there to give more pointers on how to get your campers to have fun would go a long way. While there might not be a lot here right now, there are plans for new biomes, weather events, cooking and decorating updates and better inter-camper relationships. There's already a strong foundation here so it's easy to see ahead to how those updates will build up to something with real potential.

There's a lot of promise here – the setting and characters are delightful, and each of the kids you take under your wing are wonderfully weird. I can't get enough of watching them waddle through the forest getting into trouble. They're annoying, picky and hilarious, and you'll want nothing but the best for the wee scamps by the end of summer. Much like the camp itself, things may be a bit barebones now, but there's still plenty of fun to be had while roughing it.

Daniella Lucas

A DAILY HIKE IS A GOOD WAY TO EARN BADGES AND THEN LET THE KIDS ROAM

$720
Day 1
7:45 AM
Michael is chopping.
Lex is getting low on FUN!
Tobias is getting low on FUN!
Learned New Like For Lex: Sharing Dinosaur Facts

Wick is in charge of tools and building.

Camp Canyonwood

ABOVE: Camp upgrades take a while to earn.

LEFT: Thanks for the warning.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT
DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS
Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK
Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia*, *Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky*, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

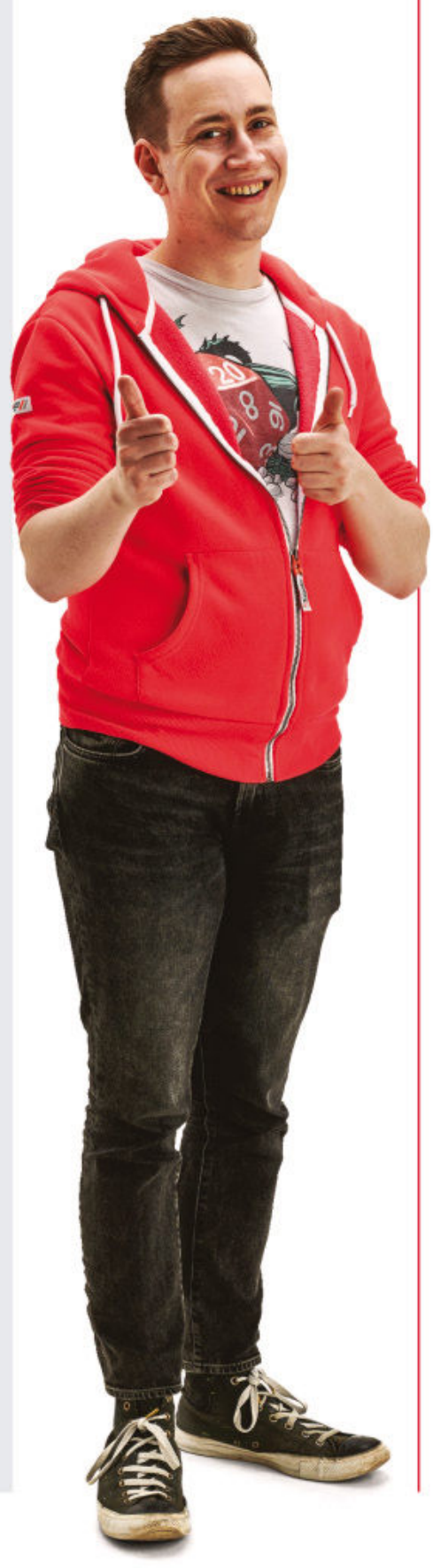
70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey*, *NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch*, *Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta*, *Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2*, *Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



IP freely

We live in the Age of IP. Once upon a time, *MultiVersus* would've seemed bizarre – a fighting game featuring such a broad array of Warner-owned characters that you can make Arya Stark fight the Iron Giant. But in a post-*Fortnite* world, it's nothing out of the ordinary. Stuffing your game with iconic creations is a hedged bet; the average person is bound to be a fan of at least one of them. It's undoubtedly cynical and creatively stagnant... and yet weirdly compelling. I love *MultiVersus* for its solid mechanics – but I have to admit I also find a surreal humour in these mash-ups. There's almost something subversive about the chaos of them, the way that all context is obliterated and a pacifist robot will happily battle an assassin who bakes her enemies into pies. Hey, if you can't fight the cultural dystopia, you might as well enjoy it.

ROBIN VALENTINE
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC PowerPlay staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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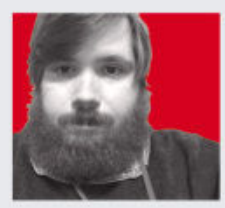
This month's criminal gang of reviewers...

JODY MCGREGOR
Specialist in
Saintly devotion
Currently playing
Saints Row
This month
Discovered that even throwing yourself into traffic isn't fun anymore.

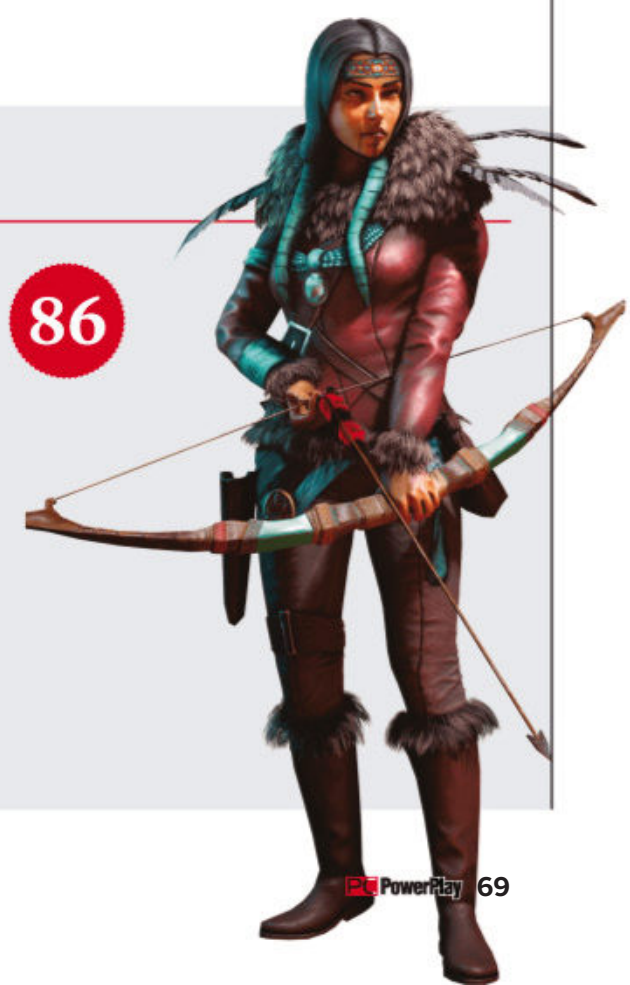
MOLLIE TAYLOR
Specialist in
Iron Giant's hitbox
Currently playing
MultiVersus
This month
Learned to fear the power of a teenager swinging a backpack around in circles.

SAMANTHA GREER
Specialist in
Lost souls
Currently playing
Thymesia
This month
Had to write yet another review of a bad *Souls*-like. Sorry.



KAILE HULTNER
Specialist in
Movie magic
Currently playing
Immortality
This month
Watched three films to review one videogame. What are developers playing at?

IAN EVENDEN
Specialist in
Cowboy magic
Currently playing
Hard West 2
This month
Discovered the supernatural power of poker (beyond making money disappear).



SAINT NO JOKE

The rebooted SAINTS ROW could really do with a dubstep gun

By Jody Macgregor

S*aints Row* is a knockabout driving/shooting/flying ragdoll-'em-up in which you lead a misnamed gang of sociopaths. The Saints are loveable sociopaths to be fair, who alternate between organised crime and high-spirited hijinx like throwing themselves into traffic for insurance money, and also some light drug trafficking on the side. That's probably the only description I can come up with vague enough to describe every game in the series, including this new reboot, without just saying it's *GTA* except the jokes are funny.

Until now, every *Saints Row* sequel was more over the top than the one before, eventually finding new tops and then somehow over-ing them. *Saints Row 2* had a villain with voodoo powers and your sidekick could take on an entire police force solo. *Saints Row: The Third* made you fight wrestlers, cyberpunks and zombies, which *Saints Row 4* bettered with an alien invasion, while its spin-off *Gat Out of Hell* had Satan as the final boss.

When fans of *SR2* say they miss how grounded it was, they mean they were OK with a game that had motorbike katana duels, but *SR3* including a Japanese game show about straight-up murdering people crossed the line. Personally, I enjoyed the escalating wackiness of the series, but it didn't leave itself a lot of places to go. Which I guess is why, instead of making a new *Saints Row* where you time-travel or establish a branch on an alien planet or something, Volition hit the reboot button.

Online I've seen these Saints called zoomers and millennials

SAINT THAT A SHAME

A *Saints Row* about starting from the ground floor might please people who miss the 'grit' of *Saints Row 2*, but if the internet is anything to go by they hate it already. The reboot comes with a new cast they despised from the first trailer. Online I've seen these Saints called zoomers and millennials as well as hipsters, which is an impressive range of meaningless descriptors that all amount to "young people I don't understand".

One of the new Saints quit an unpaid internship to become a mechanic for a crime boss, one's a startup entrepreneur who overdosed on motivational TED talks and podcasts, and the other's a DJ who is allergic to wearing a shirt. Meanwhile, you work for a private security firm whose disposable employees often don't survive training. All these characters parody modern archetypes just like the old games' wannabe energy drink mogul, post-hippie stoner, and Auto-Tuned pimp did back when they were relevant. While I don't care about the new crew in the same way as the scoundrels who grew into a close-knit family over the course of the original games, these characters haven't had a bunch of sequels to develop. They're fine.

We meet these rebooted Saints at their peak in an intro where they run the city, then spend the next 25 hours in a flashback covering how they got there. That means after fully customising your boss to look like, say, an elderly Batman villain or a mime who has turned to crime, suddenly you're an ordinary schmo with a day job in law enforcement and roommates who are so young they know and care who Doja Cat is. I ended up swapping my carefully designed character for the first preset an hour in because I felt like a miscast actor. Which is a shame, because it's a great character creator in a series known for them.

Even if you stick with a default face, the clothing options let you get fancy with layers, mixing and matching shirts under jackets and socks separately from shoes. That's something *Saints Row* hasn't done since embracing clothes with physics. The cost is that coats and skirts are noticeably stiff and most of the hairstyles are static, for reasons that became obvious when I tried a ponytail and it clipped right through my face. Still, whether you want your boss to be a leather-jacket badass, bright green doofus, or dressed as a taco, *Saints Row* provides.

SAINT GOT THAT SWING

When I'm wearing a luchador mask and murdering EDM-themed criminals who twirl glowstick shields, *Saints Row* is a good time. You can shoot while lying prone on

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An urban playground where the cars are made of explodium, but the tone's not quite as incendiary

EXPECT TO PAY
$80.95

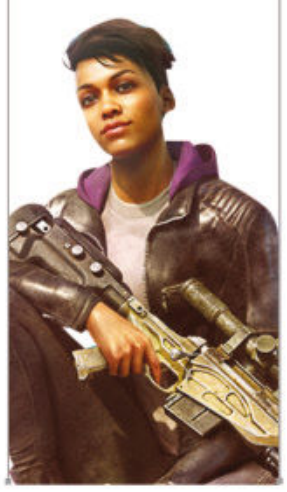
DEVELOPER
Volition

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

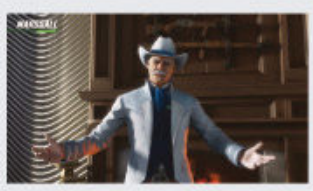
LINK
saintsrow.com



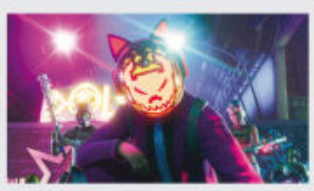
YOUR RIVALS

These jerks are even worse than you

SERGIO
Boss of Los Panteros, a gang who smuggle contraband across the border in their sweet, souped-up rides.



ATTICUS
Runs Marshall Defense Industries, a private peacekeeping agency of high-tech cowboys.



THE COLLECTIVE
Six anonymous pseudo-anarchists who play Robin Hood while actually running a cult called The Idols.

What have Daft Punk been doing since they disbanded? Crimes.

FAR LEFT: The tank rampage is also a gag about AI vehicles.

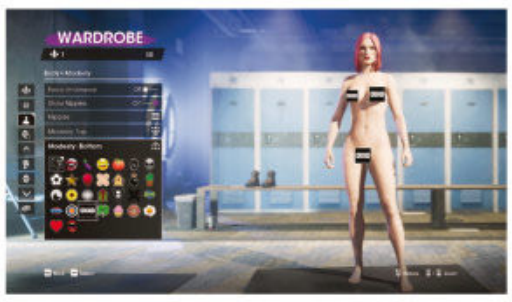
LEFT: The crib gets more luxe as you play.

BELOW: Who would have thought the young man would have so much blood in him?

Kev is allergic to cats as well as wearing a shirt.

RIGHT: A variety of censor bars for the connoisseur.

FAR RIGHT: Boats blow up nice.



Monster trucks, a *Saints Row* staple.

top of moving cars, and unlock abilities that let you do gun-fu or jam a grenade down someone's pants then chuck them at a crowd. The takedown animations include lots of gory knife-and-pistol work, but also human torpedoes and a Karate Kid crane kick.

Options to change how it plays are welcome and plentiful, with a menu that should be shown to other games while they sit in the corner and think about what they've done. The GPS arrows that illuminate streets to show you where to go can be turned off or tweaked so they only highlight corners, the minimap can be resized, enemy health changed if you find them too spongy or too weak, ammo scarcity altered, nudity toggled or covered with a variety of humorous censor bars, time limits extended or turned off completely – there's lots of stuff to fiddle with.

I was tempted to set mission timers to be more forgiving after a bug made the countdown vanish and I failed one because I didn't realise the clock had started. In the end I didn't actually mess with these settings, apart from the vehicle camera's snappiness. I just appreciate they exist, which is how I feel about the drop-in two-player mode I will also never bother with because... just leave me alone.

It runs well on PC too, which wasn't a given. To get a decent framerate out of *Saints Row: The Third Remastered* I had to turn off Windows 10's data execution prevention, and the original version of *SR3* is just as quirky about running on modern hardware. Meanwhile, the reboot stays well over 60fps and looks nicer doing it than early trailers suggested. Some of the corners cut to make that framerate happen are obvious, like the fuzzy hair that makes your cat look like it stepped out of another game, the occasional odd shadow or jagged item of clothing, and the way cars in the middle distance transition to the ethereal plane when they see you coming.

The jobs you need to do, are the worst they've ever been

The city's not particularly bustling either. Santo Ileso, a desert burg somewhere in the American Southwest, doesn't have the kind of crowded centre that's fun to buzz in a stolen helicopter as you weave between the skyscraper forest. It's so flat I forgot I even had a wingsuit when I wasn't doing the side hustles that force you to use it.

SAINT NO DOUBT

A hallmark of the *Saints Row* games is how they connect those open world activities. You never feel like a different character to the one in the main plot when you pull some sidequest mayhem, because you're just as much of a maniac in the cutscenes. And you have to do side stuff to unlock new missions, a push and pull that usually means at least one long stretch of chores because you ate too much meat before polishing off your vegetables.

That's more aggravating than usual here because the jobs you need to do, called criminal ventures, are the worst they've ever been. Having to drive trucks full of toxic waste to a dump without spilling it gets real tedious, and the returning insurance fraud activity (the one where you run into traffic) is less fun than it used to be. The ragdoll after-touch has been toned down, making it harder to tumble into multiple cars for combos as you flop down the highway like a fish with a death wish.

The best new venture is testing experimental prototypes you get to keep, including a hoverboard and sticky rocket-bombs called thrustbusters that propel targets into the sky like they've been alien-abducted. Apart from that I found myself sticking to vanilla side missions, like stealing food trucks, because the others were so underwhelming.

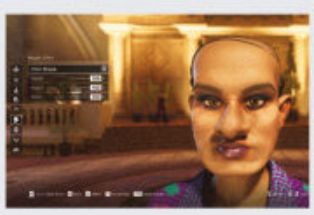
Unlocking these criminal ventures costs increasing amounts of cash too, and spending $400,000 or more on one that turns out to be a dud is a real kick in the teeth. (Honestly, delay the toxic dump one as long as you can.)

Compared to spraying sewage on mansions to lower property values or driving a car while being mauled by a tiger who sits in the passenger seat, the reboot's activities seem down-to-earth. One of them is literally just taking photos. Likewise, apart from the thrustbusters and a foam glove pistol, most of the weapons are real guns, and while there are perks to throw antigravity grenades or summon backup Saints out of thin air, you're only allowed to put four on your ability wheel at a time. (Half the time the backup Saints stand around doing nothing while getting shot.)

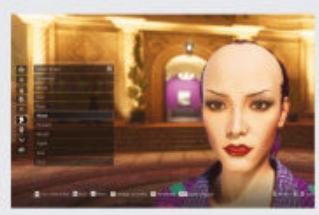
Saints Row is always at its best when it cuts loose, when it goes full dubstep-gun stupid, and the reboot forgets that for long stretches. When it remembers, you get things like a storyline in which you take part in a citywide LARP, fighting Mad Max roleplayers with foam weapons while dressed in cardboard armour, and that's the kind of daftness it could do with more of. ■

EASY SLIDER

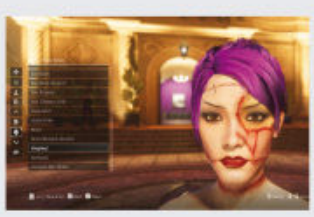
The four stages of character creation



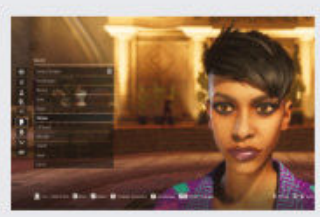
STAGE 1
What if I just push every slider all the way to the right?



STAGE 2
Barber, give me the worst haircut available, please.



STAGE 3
I definitely won't get sick of having stuff all over my face.



STAGE 4
[Hours later] You know what, let's just stick with a preset.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Unfortunately the knockabout glee of *Saints Row* ultraviolence is held back by new-found restraint.

60

CLOSE COMBAT

MULTIVERSUS is an unexpectedly great matchup – even if it does whiff a few attacks

I'm Adventure Time's Jake the Dog, standing on the edge of a Rick and Morty-themed arena. I'm about to beat Shaggy from Scooby-Doo into a bloody pulp while my teammate Arya Stark is casually stealing Batman's face. A few years ago this would have given me severe whiplash, but in a world where tennis star Naomi Osaka is throwing hands at Naruto in *Fortnite*, nothing surprises me any more. Well, except for one thing: *MultiVersus* is actually pretty damn good.

Believe me, I never expected it either. The initial reveal left me disinterested – it looked like another weaksauce attempt to be *Smash Bros*, and I'm not much of a platform fighter gal anyway. I much prefer my fighting games in a tight, enclosed 3D arena a la *Tekken* and *Soulcalibur*. I came into *MultiVersus* not expecting much, but found that Player First Games has begun to lay the groundwork for something remarkable.

Don't get me wrong, *MultiVersus*' biggest inspiration is still clear. Anyone who has spent a modicum of time with Nintendo's brawler will quickly get the gist: smack your opponent with a mixture of normal, air, and special attacks in order to increase their damage meter; avoid letting them do the same to you. Victory has nothing to do with getting a health bar from 100 to 0, it's all done through the damage meter. While the number is low, you're weighty and difficult to knock off the top and sides of the arena. As it gets higher though, your character turns into a rubber bouncy ball, and becomes susceptible to all kinds of spikes and knockback attacks that can fling you straight into the death zone. Knock your opponent out of the arena enough times and you'll claim victory.

Every character has abilities that can support teammates

MULTI PLAYER

It's your standard platform fighter formula at this point, but *MultiVersus* manages a few key differences that really set it apart. The first one is how the game handles its roster. Every character belongs to a class: tank, support, mage, bruiser, and assassin. Tanks like Wonder Woman and Iron Giant can take more hits and are harder to ring out but are slower. Assassins like Finn the Human and Arya Stark are nimble fighters, dealing big damage quickly.

What's nice is there doesn't feel like any pressure to match up particular classes – you can easily run a team of two supports and successfully outmatch bruisers and tanks if you have the skill. They're a great initial indicator of how you can expect to play each character, but it doesn't feel like any one class is at an inherent disadvantage compared to the others.

There are also the game modes themselves. While other platformers feel more at home in a free-for-all or 1v1 setting, *MultiVersus* thrives off a 2v2 format. The other two modes are present in the game, but this game was absolutely made for 2v2 and it's where I spent most of my time. Every character has abilities that can support teammates as well as harm foes. Jake the Dog can swallow opponents and spit them out, but he can also quickly chomp an ally and save them from a nasty combo. Wonder Woman's lasso can grab onto opponents but also serve as a quick rescue for teammates.

KILLER INSTINCT

It took me a while to get used to the synergy of playing with another person, and to the way *MultiVersus* feels in general. It's an awful lot floatier than other fighting games I've played – it's lacking a bit of weight, and characters can hover around for what feels like a lifetime. It starts to feel pretty good once you're in the flow of things though. While I would still like a little more snap, the floatiness feels largely necessary for decent recovery and actually making use of those teammate abilities.

I had access to the entire roster straight away, but those coming into it free-to-play will have to work to unlock each one. Thankfully each one is readily available to try out in

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A platform fighter with an eclectic, iconic cast of characters.

EXPECT TO PAY
Free-to-play

DEVELOPER
Player First Games

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment

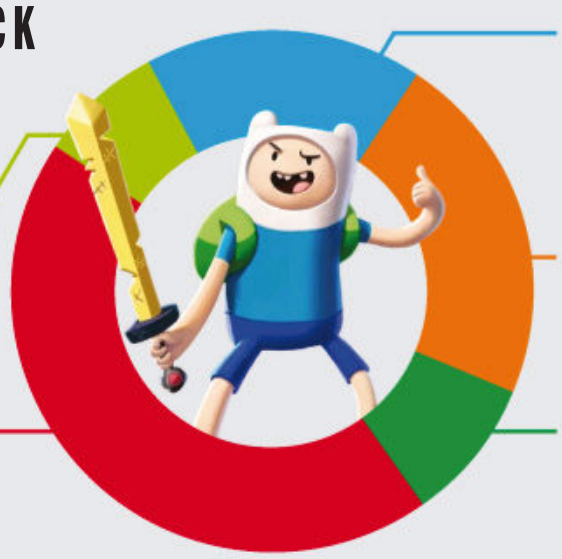
REVIEWED ON
Nvidia GeForce RTX3070, AMD Ryzen 7 2700X, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
multiversus.com

SMACKPACK

What's in Finn's bag?



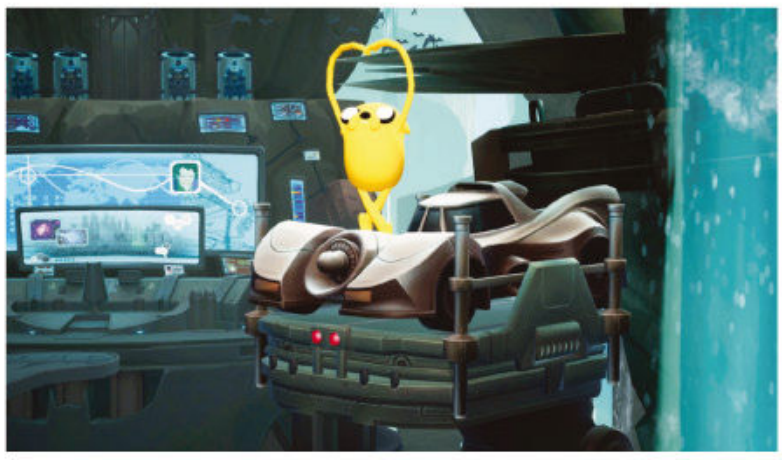
8% HAIRBRUSH
He's gotta get those luscious blonde locks under that hat somehow...

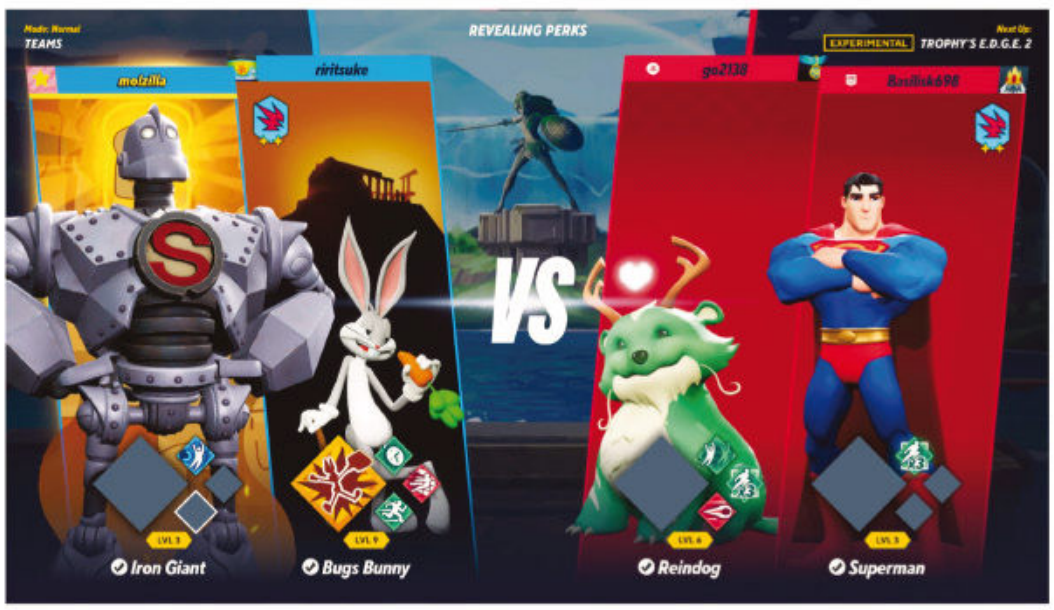
44% NEPTR
Who let the never-ending pie-throwing robot bastard loose?

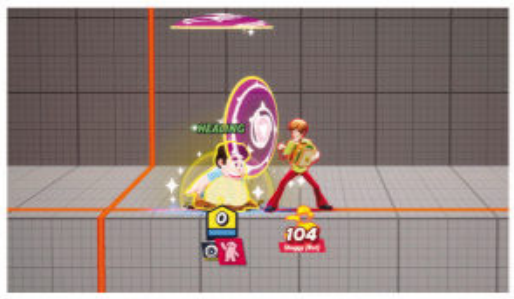
17% BMO
Because who wouldn't want an adorable talking Gameboy companion?

22% GOLD COINS
They've gotta be coming from somewhere!

9% EXTRA HATS
For when his current one gets dirty.







ABOVE: You can buy or earn emotes for taunting your opponents.

FAR LEFT: Ten years ago this would have been the most ridiculous videogame screenshot to exist.

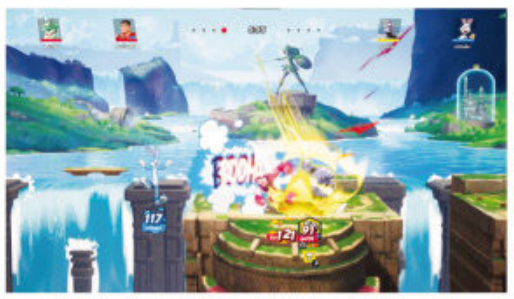
LEFT: Finn's backpack spin attack was the scourge of the game when he was in free rotation.

Famous pacifist robot Iron Giant about to give a literal child the old left-right-goodnight.

Arya Stark is a particularly odd inclusion.

RIGHT: LeBron James pummels enemies to death with his basketball.

BELOW RIGHT: Stages mostly feel a bit small and basic right now.



Wonder Woman's shield can block projectiles.

I feel like I've read this fanfiction before...

the training mode and a regular free character rotation lets you experiment with relative ease. It's also not too much of a slog to reach your first paid character, though subsequent progress slows down.

As I tinkered around with each character, I ended up taking a liking to Iron Giant. He's about twice the size of everyone else and prone to a heavy smackdown, but in return he can dish out big damage and easily shield teammates, allowing them to safely get a fair few hits in on the other team. At first I was an absolute letdown, butt-stomping my way off the map and having my car-swinging shenanigans quickly shut down. But my god, nothing was as satisfying as moments where I could finally land my big shiny metal rear on an opponent, launching them into the air as my teammate jumped and poked them straight out of the arena.

Playing each character also becomes more fun once you level them up and gain perks. Every game played with a character gives them EXP, and levelling up grants access to equippable perks that give you small buffs. You can even stack these perks with your teammate for extra benefits, which makes the pre-match setup feel a lot more strategic at higher levels. After I played around enough with Iron Giant, I was given a perk that made his rocket boots leave a trail of fire on the ground. It was a move I hadn't felt much need to use before, but once I was able to scorch my tiny nemeses beneath my feet I found myself integrating it into my play a lot more.

Playing each character also becomes more fun once you level them up

PUNCHING DOWN

There are some glaring frustrations with how *MultiVersus* plays, though. Hit priority is a mess. For the uninitiated, when two moves connect the priority is given to whichever attack has more power. If both attacks hit simultaneously and have a similar power level, they'll cancel each other out. It doesn't seem to be at all present here.

Couple that with what appears to be an odd hitbox and hurtbox system, and it's a pain in the ass to contend with. I noticed this with Finn in particular – his backpack has become a meme, having an oddly gigantic hitbox and causing him to win a lot of matchups he shouldn't. It's worth noting that the hitbox/hurtbox system is already receiving an overhaul, but right now it's a major flaw. Those at a super casual level likely won't perceive it in finer detail, but it was something that became increasingly obvious to me as I spent more time with the game.

I also have some pretty major gripes with the current map designs. Right now there are eight stages in *MultiVersus*, with two of those being variations on another existing map. I had to go and look that up just now, because I can only remember two of the stages: the Scooby-Doo and Rick and Morty ones. The latter I only recall because it was unlocked as part of a community challenge. The Scooby-Doo one, however, has the honour of being my most and least favourite stage. It's the only one I recall having some form of fun interactions – you can punch a little cog on either side of the arena to cause a portion of the platform to disappear. It's also small, bordering on suffocating. It doesn't help that I play a character who is three times the size of the rest of the cast, but larger maps wouldn't go amiss.

Most stages consist of one main platform and then two or three smaller platforms above it. They're fine. But they feel so cramped and uninspired, like being stuck in an elevator made of bread. There are a couple of wall breaks here and there and they look pretty, but they're devoid of the levels of creativity Player First Games has managed to demonstrate through its roster.

BABY STEPS

Unsurprisingly, *MultiVersus* is also home to a battle pass. I've never been a fan of them and this one is no different. The first season's pass has 50 tiers. There's a nice distribution of rewards throughout the tiers, but progression feels unsatisfying. I spent most of my time farming my seasonal milestones, which are randomised per player with no ability to reroll. It meant I was gunning for some ridiculous and unfun goals like ringing-out 25 opponents at less than 60 damage or connecting 200 fully charged attacks. More battle pass points per match would go a long way, along with the ability to reroll some more frustrating milestones outside of my skill level.

As it stands, *MultiVersus* has done a good job of laying the foundations for a fantastic platform fighter that has the potential to blossom into something amazing. Killer backpacks and janky hitboxes aside, each character is brimming with personality and movesets that never feel too out-of-character. It's helped by the fact that Warner Bros was able to recruit a ton of the cast's original voice actors, something that you don't see very often. It's a game not without its problems though – until hitbox and hit priorities are fixed, *MultiVersus* will continue to fall flat for people at a higher skill level. But for a game still in open beta, *MultiVersus* is a worthy competitor in the platform fighter genre. ■

FIGHTING WORDS

A look at Velma's game plan

STICKS AND STONES
Verbally bullies you until you spit out little pieces of evidence. Ouch.

GET THE SCOOP
Digs up any and all dirt on you. I didn't mean to steal those sweets in 2008!

9-1-1
Literally narcs on you to the cops. What the hell, Velma?

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

MultiVersus is a fun *Smash Bros* on PC that needs a little more fine-tuning to reach its full potential.

78

HURRY, CHOP CHOP

It feels good being baaad in CULT OF THE LAMB

By Luke Kemp

At first, it looks like this is going to be a remarkably short game. Things start with you, as a cowering little lamb, being led to your death as a sacrifice. Within ten minutes however, you've already exacted violent revenge on your would-be murderers and pledged your adorable allegiance to the mysterious being that returned you to the land of the living. You start a cult of your own; a cult where all the members are super-cute creatures.

This is *Animal Crossing* if Tom Nook craved power instead of money. The first half of the game involves growing, caring for, and – of course – indoctrinating your cult. You'll need to take care of the basics before getting too ambitious, though. Your adorable little cultists need food to eat, places to sleep, and somewhere to poop. Don't give them that last one, and they'll just do it wherever they feel like it in the field you're developing. Well, they *are* animals, after all.

The second half feeds directly into the first half. There are four dungeons, which you need to complete both for the narrative (on your quest to free the one who resurrected you), and for the upkeep of your cult (new followers and resources can be found). This part of the game is essentially a roguelike, with randomised weapons and rooms, and perks to be unlocked. Combat is solid, if sometimes a bit button-bashy when you've been given a fast but weak weapon.

The levelling and unlock system is, quite frankly, genius

Yet the feedback loop sees your actions in your settlement having a direct impact on your progress in the dungeons. The levelling and unlock system is, quite frankly, genius. The fundamental idea is that the bigger and happier your cult is, the faster you can harvest their Devotion, which works as XP. This in turn either directly or indirectly unlocks weapons, perks and abilities for the dungeons, and blueprints for decoration and functional buildings for your cult. Part of the progression system involves developing your cult's doctrine. While this is a binary either/or choice each time, it's still an enjoyable way to decide how reasonable/evil you want to be while gaining a new perk in the process. For example, I wanted to make sure that my followers respected the elderly, resulting in a faith boost whenever I had a member reach a certain age. That more than makes up for the cannibalism thing, right?

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A game that puts the 'cult' into 'cutlet'

EXPECT TO PAY
$35.95

DEVELOPER
Massive Monster

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

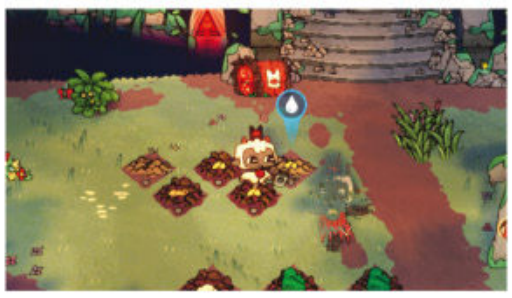
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
cultofthelamb.com

SHEEPING AROUND

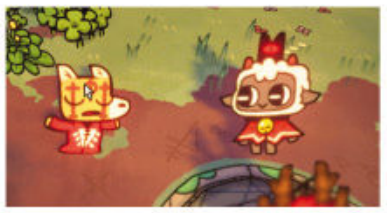
Yet there is even *more* to *Cult of the Lamb*. With the story done, the dungeons truly open up, no longer coming to a close when you hit what was previously the boss room. You can keep going for as long as you dare, running the risk of losing a portion of what you've collected if you die. Although, how long you play won't necessarily be your choice. There's one enemy that you can never quite defeat: time.

There's a gentle yet constant pressure to the game, in the form of the day/night cycle. Whether you're at your settlement, in one of the other



ABOVE: Save that bunny!

RIGHT: WORSHIP ME MORE! MORE!!!!



TOP: That's... a lot of teeth.

locations you slowly discover, or in the middle of an adventure in a dungeon, time is slowly passing. In order to keep up with the demands of your cult, you need to keep a good balance between settlement upkeep and dungeon adventuring. Nothing wrong with that, but it would be nice to have the option of leaning more heavily into one side or the other if you felt like it.

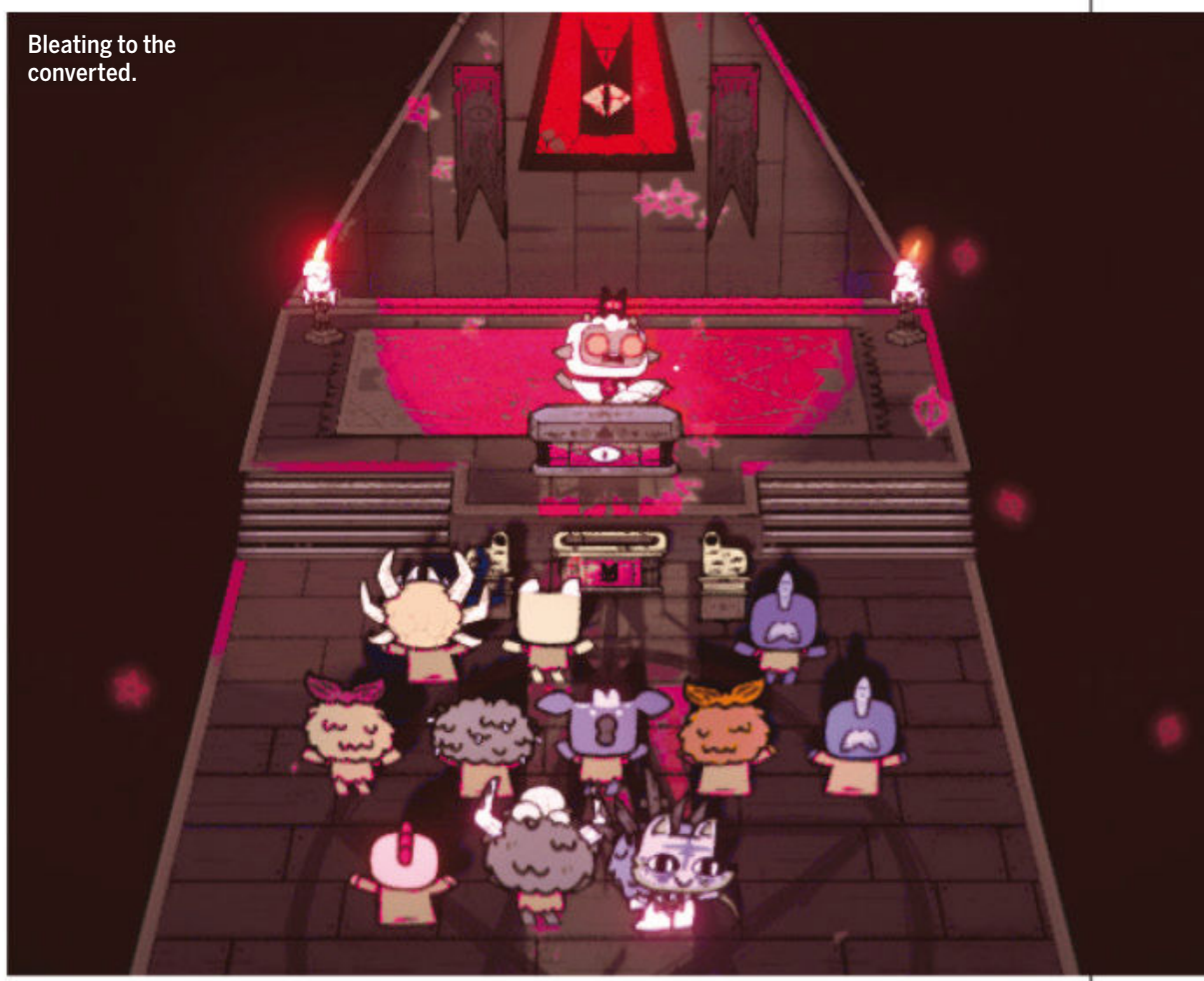
Still, *Cult of the Lamb* is wonderfully designed, and the script is sharp and funny. The atmosphere is great, helped in no small part by art which immediately endears itself to you. Speaking of which, making all of your followers adorable wickle critters was a smart choice. Intentionally or otherwise, it makes the brainwashing and murky morals amusing rather than disturbing.

Occasionally, I found myself thinking 'erm, this really *is* like a cult', such as the time the game gleefully informed me that I could marry as many of my followers as I wanted. Don't be fooled into thinking that this game is anything but great, though. I adore it, and that is almost certainly my own opinion unaffected by nefarious influences. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Cult of the Lamb **is unlike anything else in a good way, you won't feel fleeced if you buy this. Ha ha! 'Fleeced...'**

82



Bleating to the converted.

PREPARING THE LAMB

Going from kebabee to kebaber

THE EXECUTION
Scared and alone, thrust into the middle of a pentagram, this is surely the end for you. Right?

THE RESURRECTION
Of course not! Brought back to life, you'll chew grass and kick ass, and you're all outta grass.

THE FLOCK
After a successful and far-from-bloodless escape, it's time to start building that cult. Rescue helpless animals.

KILLING TIME
Even though they're oddly cute, you'll need to go dungeon diving to kill all those demons in the search for goodies.

SOULS-YIKES

I am requesting we stop making Dark Souls rip offs like THYMESIA

By Samantha Greer

Ban *Souls*-likes. Please, for the love all that is holy, ban them. I cannot think of a sub-genre that has so thoroughly burnt itself out in so short a time while producing so little of value. Numerous imitators have come and gone while the very games they're trying to ape continue to be made. What good is a middling *Dark Souls* clone when *Dark Souls* is right there? This very year we had *Elden Ring* for goodness sake!

Of course, there is one beloved From Software property you can't play on PC (at least, outside of some wonky streaming options). *Bloodborne* has long been demanded for the platform and so, maybe, *Thymesia* has a place here? Offering players a taste of an experience beyond their reach? If it's a taste, it's no more than a mouldy breadcrumb.

Tell me if you've heard this before: in a city ravaged by plague that turns people into monsters, it's up to one gifted hunter to cleanse these foul streets. I try to take games on their own terms but *Thymesia* is nothing but a pale shadow of its obvious inspiration. Not so much wearing its influences on its sleeve as wearing their entire skin. From the protagonist looking like a cheap Halloween costume alternative to *Bloodborne*'s Eileen the Crow to the hub that is obviously intended to be the Hunter's Dream and even the fonts, this is a game without an original bone in its body. That's a problem when your source material was lauded precisely because of its originality, twisting the *Dark Souls* format into something wildly different, introducing players to what seemed like a Gothic infused romp that eventually revealed itself to be something grander and cosmic. *Bloodborne* was imaginative in so many departments, with its trick weapons and dream worlds, it leaves *Thymesia*'s flaws exposed like gaping, festering wounds.

Animations are just a bit simplistic and lacking in the character

ELDEN BO-RING

Despite a novel conceit in which you steal the essence of enemy weapons and 'summon' them at opportune moments, *Thymesia* feels bereft of the range of From's combat, ultimately treading closer to a character action game than an RPG. That's not necessarily a bad thing except for the fact combat in *Thymesia* always feels a little stiffer and a little more awkward than it should be. Animations are just a bit simplistic and lacking in the character that elevates From Software's battles into memorable encounters. The limited tools at your disposal also leave fights feeling quickly repetitive as every enemy essentially requires the same fundamental attacks in the same order, varied only in length as determined by their preposterously large health bars. Even with some upgrades, combat remains a case of spamming attacks until you get the little prompt for a follow up with your green glowing claw attack. Enemies also only take 'wounds', which means that you can knock off all their health and still not kill them. To do that, you need to use your claw to leach their power and finish them off. Failure to do so will see enemies recovering their health.

Like many bad *Souls* imitators, *Thymesia* takes difficulty to heart and expects that it's going to be the draw for many players. Even aside from the missing legwork required to make me care enough to confront difficult foes, mysteries and intrigue, *Thymesia* forgets that From Software's games build in numerous clever affordances that let players tackle enemies in clever ways to overcome the baseline difficulty. *Bloodborne* for instance would give players pebbles and Molotov cocktails, tools that could be cleverly used to manage crowds or take big chunks off an enemy health bar with ease. *Thymesia* provides you with precious few tools and instead really commits to the 'git gud' mantra of *Dark Souls* fans. There's no multiplayer either, no way to rope a friend in for the game's challenges.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A gruelling action RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
$34.95

DEVELOPER
OverBorder Studio

PUBLISHER
Team17

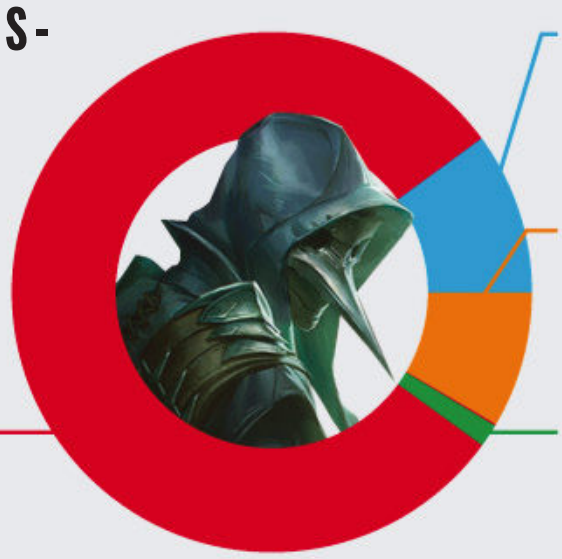
REVIEWED ON
64-Bit Windows 10, Nvidia GeForce GTX 970, Intel i7-4790K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
team17.com/games/thymesia

HOW SOULS-LIKE WE TALKIN'?

Which From games have been pillaged?



10% DEMON'S SOULS
Some *Demon's Souls* energy makes its way in.

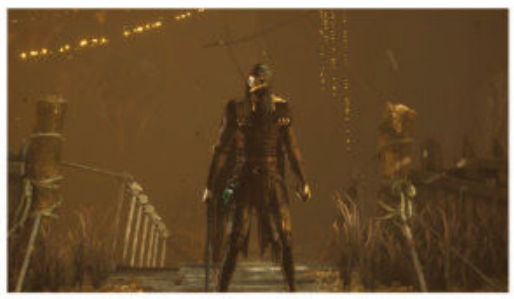
8% TOP HAT GUY
That top hat guy from *Artorias of the Abyss*.

2% ORIGINALITY
A couple of small original ideas, for good measure.

80% BLOODBORNE
Bloodborne's everything. The game's cornerstone.

Compare this design to the beautiful armoured foes of *Dark Souls* and you'll get why this doesn't cut it.

It wasn't until the livestock began dying and those who had been infected began shrieking out in pain that they realized a deadly plague had befallen them.



FAR LEFT: There are shades other than brown in the game, I swear.

LEFT: This spooky child is the equivalent of *Bloodborne*'s doll but far less interesting.

ABOVE: I mean at least PRETEND you didn't copy From Software's homework.

BELOW: In fleeting moments, the visuals do come together to make something striking.

I'm not one to shrink from a challenge but the lack of options winds up just leading to tedium.

BLOOD WELL-WORN

It goes big too quickly, offering no divergent paths for players to find challenges suited to them and instead thrusting multi-stage bosses at the first opportunity. *Dark Souls* might hide a deadly challenge early on but only as a bit of fun, a tease of what's to be overcome, not an actual test for starting players. An early boss in *Thymesia*, clearly meant to evoke the legendary clock tower fight against Maria in *Bloodborne*'s DLC, is such a showcase for the gulf between this and the original. Maria is a masterfully staged duel, her moveset evoking the hands of the clock while the fight's escalation charts her character history, giving us her story in reverse just like how we are moving backwards in time through the city's history. *Thymesia*'s fight is a school yard brawl, two amateurs slapping at each other until somebody gets hurt. There's some undercurrent about a circus and performers but it's a mild bit of flavour rather than anything compelling. Between the clumsy movement and simplistic mechanics, there isn't room for a legendary confrontation to develop. It's not terrible, it's just not especially good and really makes clear the myriad of details that make something like *Bloodborne* sing.

The game's world is as dreary as its foes, with none of the tantalising teases that From's games excel at. Its first major area, the Sea of Trees, actually resembles the Valley of Defilement from *Demon's Souls* but instead of an ever darkening descent below the earth, it's a walk around a confusing array of overlapping scaffolding. The world design is bereft of the thematic elements that make a place worth learning. There's no sense of geography or story here, only some brown assets slapped together. Some of the later areas are a little more promising but they reveal themselves to be as thoughtless as the drab starting areas.

The story itself is so obviously trying to be a From Software 'greatest hits', with ancient trees and plagues and a king who went a bit off the rails. Again, not a problem inherently. What matters is how a tale is told. Alas, *Thymesia* emulates the beats of a *Dark Souls* or a *Bloodborne* but with none of the essential subtlety. It presents few questions to the player, leaving you with no threads to pull. Without the allure of deeper mysteries, you're only motive is simply the battles themselves. Except in a *Dark Souls* or a *Bloodborne* those things are deeply intertwined, with each foe sketching out the world, hinting at or revealing some deeper truth. *Thymesia*'s foes were too dull or tacky to draw me in. I never cared about the fate of its world the way I did recently with *Elden Ring*'s The Lands Between or how much I really wanted to get to the bottom of the mystery of Yharnam in *Bloodborne*.

In what world are fans of these games starved of their iterations?

DAFT SOULS

And god the music. It is, to be fair, the one department in which it almost completely avoids mimicking *Bloodborne*. The downside is it instead opts for a stilted score of twee melodies that feels like it would be a better fit for a *Fable* game. On repeated attempts I found these simplistic tunes to be uniquely annoying and never the kind of thing that brought me into the game. The music isn't bad perhaps but it is another example of the game failing to coalesce into anything coherent.

PREPARE TO SIGH

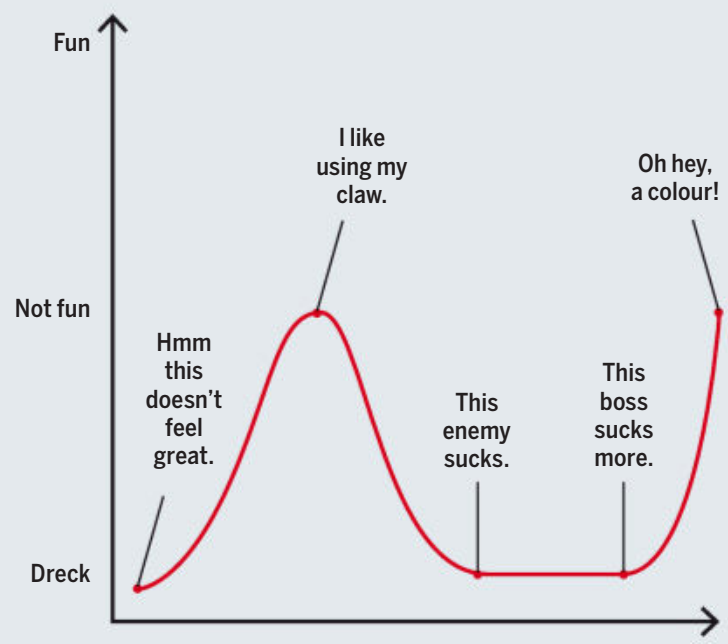
I have talked as much about *Bloodborne* throughout this review as I have *Thymesia* because there's simply no getting around it. It is someone's smash grab of another game's iconography, dragged through the mud and propped back together with Sellotape. *Thymesia* is a game clearly on a much smaller budget. It could never do all the things a big expensive title like *Bloodborne* does. So why try? Why invite this comparison? I am begging the creators of *Souls*-likes to stop chasing the ghost of their time with these lauded games and instead find their own voice. From Software isn't just the best at what it does, From's STILL DOING IT.

In what world are fans of these games starved of their finest iterations? Why would they settle for a cheap knock off? Even From Software itself has only survived by iterating and experimenting. If you want to compete with them then you need to do more than bear a fleeting resemblance. The tragedy of *Thymesia* is the glimmers of original ideas, like the wound mechanic, are all suffocated by being squeezed into the From Software template instead of explored in their own right. These ideas deserved their own game, a game which could find a thematic universe to house them in.

Reviewing these *Souls*-likes necessitates repeating myself because they keep making the same mistakes, learning the wrong lessons from games they admire but show no critical perspective of. There's a failure to understand what makes those games tick and *Thymesia* can't even manage the basics, let alone take the format in a bold new direction. Even if you're oblivious to its inspirations, this is a slog of an action RPG, devoid of charm or imagination. At least it succeeds in pursuing the joyless misery you'd expect from living through a plague. ■

LOWER THAN BLIGHTTOWN

***The lows and lower lows of* Thymesia**



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

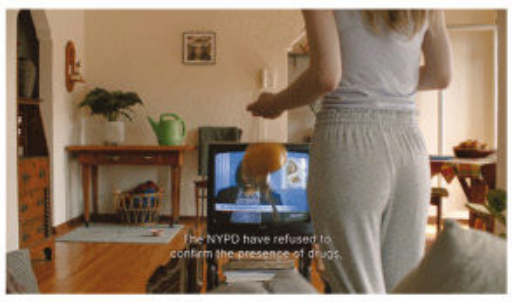
Unfortunately *Thymesia* is no *Bloodborne* or *Dark Souls* substitute. This is definitely an ill-advised *Souls*-like.

48

Moisturise and exfoliate.

RIGHT: Bad news.

BELOW: Parent-teacher conference.



Look good for the camera.

NOTHING LASTS FOREVER

In IMMORTALITY, art is a force that creates and destroys

By Kaile Hultner

Where does art come from? What makes creating a film different from writing a letter or inventing the toaster? Does it come from within us, or is it, sort of, all around us, y'know? This is the realm of philosophy that *Immortality* delves into as you unravel its FMV-led mysteries. It is presented less as a game and more as a box set of forgotten (and fictional) French model and actor Marissa Marcel's filmography.

Players begin with a question posed in the Short History of Marissa Marcel, written by *Immortality* director Sam Barlow: what happened to the actor? Why has she been absent for 20 years? Why were none of her movies released? Where is she now?

Luckily, the answers may lie in the large cache of film Barlow and his crew – producer Natalie Watson and programmer Connor Carson – found back in 2020. "After carefully collating and scanning the footage," Barlow writes, "we have created this piece of computer software in an attempt to preserve this work and share it so that Marissa may live again in the hearts of audiences."

"The image is never a simple reality," wrote philosopher Jacques Rancière. Likewise, the images in *Immortality* are rarely ever just what they seem. They hide things, distort meanings, and play with expectations.

The game itself is structured like a Moviola editing machine

Part of how *Immortality* hides things is through restraint. Unlike previous Barlow-helmed games, players do not have immediate or comprehensive access to the entirety of the footage. Instead, they start with a single interview from a '60s-era late night talk show, and are expected to organically branch out from there. This is where the game's first major mechanic comes in: the match cut.

Match cuts are a commonly-used editing technique to build visual clarity for moviegoers. In *Immortality*, the technique is used to find similarly-composed images across different movies and other media. By pausing the scene, players can examine small aspects of it and, like a point-and-click adventure game, click on whatever they are interested in. This will teleport them to another scene with the same actor or a similar object in it. As players teleport around, they add the scenes they find to their library, and gradually, the true (or 'true') story emerges. The match cut here acts like its cinematographic counterpart by creating narrative, instead of visual, continuity for the player.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An immersive interactive movie where you are the editor and the film might be haunted

EXPECT TO PAY
$26/Free on PC Game Pass

DEVELOPER
Sam Barlow, Half Mermaid

PUBLISHER
Half Mermaid

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3500U, Radeon Vega Mobile Gfx 2.10 GHz, 12 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
halfmermaid.co

HIDE AND SEEK

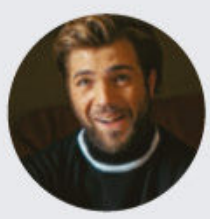
The game itself is structured like a Moviola editing machine, and combined with the match cut mechanic, the player is able to put together their own 'supercut' based almost entirely on vibes. It's very satisfying to go down these rabbit holes on your way to solving the mystery at the heart of the game, and the sense that you are actively participating in this created world is bolstered by the presence of excellent background music that intensifies as you jump from scene to scene.

As a note, while there are full mouse and keyboard controls built in, the developer does recommend use of a controller. Additionally, players will want to scrub back and forth through scenes, as hints and insights can sometimes be found running the footage backwards.

Past its mechanics, *Immortality* is a remarkable game, an interrogation into the human cost of art and a teardown of the film industry's rotten treatment of women and other marginalised people, past and present. It skewers the idea of the auteur, even as it mimics the form and formats of 'great artists' of the past. Immortality may draw comparisons to films by Alfred Hitchcock or David Lynch, or even past Barlow-penned titles like *Telling Lies* or *Her Story*. That may be unavoidable. But as a game, it goes much further beyond anything it might compare to. ■

CLASS ACT *Meet some of the cast and crew*

ROBERT JONES
MILES SZANTO
A heartthrob chosen specifically to be the Ambrosio to Marcel's Rosario/Matilda.



CARL GREENWOOD
TY MOLBAK
A James Dean type whose charisma is matched by his playfulness.

JOHN DURICK
HANS CHRISTOPHER
Director of photography on Ambrosio.

MARISSA MARCEL
MANON GAGE
Timeless, ageless, the true star of this and every show.

ARTHUR FISCHER
JOHN EARL ROBINSON
Director who claims to have 'discovered' Marcel.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Immortality is Sam Barlow's best, most thought-provoking game yet, and a barnstorming debut for Half Mermaid.

95

DEADGOOD

HARD WEST 2's mix of turn-based tactics and supernatural cowboys is a humdinger

By Ian Evenden

Just about anything can be made better by the addition of the supernatural. Pirates of the Caribbean exploited a winning formula with its ghostly buccaneers, Stranger Things puts the demons in D&D, and *Hard West* has hit a home run with its tales of the weird Wild West. An *XCOM*-like tactics game, except when it isn't, *Hard West 2* brings some up-to-date ideas to the poker table.

It starts with a train, as many of the best things do. You're robbing it, naturally, and having done your research you're sure there aren't many guards. 'You' in this case are Gin Carter, a horse-riding, hat-wearing, six-shooter aficionado who's the nominal leader of a band of outlaws. This train heist is gonna make him rich, you'll see. With him are Laughing Deer, Native American melee specialist, Flynn, who keeps to the shadows, and trick-shooter Kestrel Colt.

The train guards don't stand a chance, except there are more of them than you expected. Happily, you have certain advantages, which stand you in good stead throughout the game. The first is that your characters have three action points rather than the traditional two. This means they can move, heal, and still shoot. Or sprint into cover and hunker down for a better chance of evading incoming fire.

LUCK OF THE DRAW

Trick shots mean ricocheting your bullets off hard surfaces to negate the effect of cover, essentially outflanking the enemy with unfairness. To facilitate this, wheelbarrows, piles of junk and non-explosive barrels are scattered around levels. You can even ping a bullet off the hanging light fitting within a building. Then there's luck, the addition of which makes your attacks more accurate.

Kill an enemy, and your action points are refilled

It's bravado, though, that makes the biggest difference. Kill an enemy, and your action points are refilled. It's so simple, but affects battles in a profound way. Suddenly they're chains to be yanked on, to see how far they go. Living enemies are stepping stones to your objective at the risk of becoming overextended and being cut to pieces on the next turn (though not for those who follow, who can be left behind by a character on a killing spree).

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Supernatural cowboy turn-based tactics

EXPECT TO PAY
$42.95

DEVELOPER
Ice Code Games

PUBLISHER
Good Shepherd Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Threadripper 2950X, Geforce RTX 3080 10GB, 64GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
hardwestgame.com

This, at least in the early stages, means Laughing Deer is a killing machine. Get him in close, add a dose of luck, and he can club anyone to death, instantly refilling his AP to move on to the next hapless victim. Luck will eventually run out, and enemies with more health arrive, but he still hits hard and it's all too easy to leave him unprotected, standing miles away from cover or allies, when the turn ends just because you were having too much fun tearing through bad guys and listening to the voice actor yell.

RED HOT POKER

Back on the train, and you've made your way up to the driver's compartment. The loco goes into a tunnel, everything goes black. When it comes out the other side, it's crawling on hundreds of centipede-like metal legs, which is unusual in a steam train. There, stoking the boiler, is a man who turns out to have some interesting powers of his own, eventually revealing himself to be Mammon, the devil incarnate. And he wants to play poker.

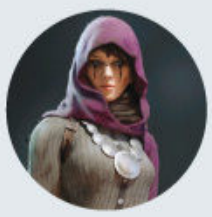
Of course you play. Of course you lose. The stakes were only your very soul (to be fair, if you'd won he'd have given you the centi-train, which was pretty tempting, and he seemed like a trustworthy guy). The loss of your soul, interestingly, stops you from casting a shadow. We're not sure how that works.

You wake up in the overworld map, a departure from the *XCOM*-alike base-building globe, and something more like Total War's strategy layer mixed with a 2D RPG. You wander around up here, discovering towns, mines and weird things next to the road, generally getting yourself into trouble and switching into the turn-based combat mode to get yourself out of it again. You dig up (sometimes quite literally) new members of your posse with new abilities, have short conversations, make decisions like

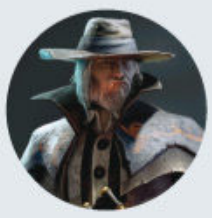
FOUR OF THE GANG

The mainstays of your six-element crew

GIN CARTER
Shoots through cover. Plays poker badly, especially against devils.



FLYNN
Weird magic woman. Never ask her to swap places with you.



OLD MAN BILL
Dead, but got better. Primarily made out of other people's bullets.

LAUGHING DEER
Can he actually see through all that war paint? No Eye Deer.

The 2D cutscenes have a stark visual style.

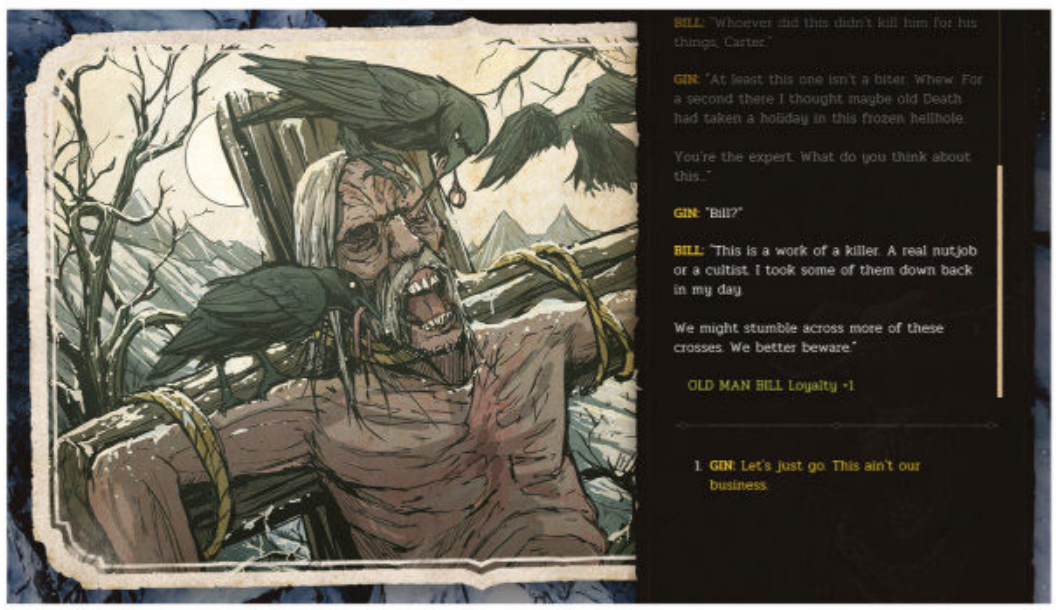
FAR LEFT: If you think we're above fart jokes in PCPP, you've another stink coming.

BELOW: This trick shot uses the candle ring hanging from the ceiling.

Where we're going we don't need... rails?

FAR RIGHT: That is not dead which can eternal lie. Squaawk!

BELOW: These boys were trying to hang Laughing Deer. And now they're sorry.


BILL: "Whoever did this didn't kill him for his things, Carter."
GIN: "At least this one isn't a biter. Whew. For a second there I thought maybe old Death had taken a holiday in this frozen hellhole.
You're the expert. What do you think about this..."
GIN: "Bill?"
BILL: "This is a work of a killer. A real nutjob or a cultist. I took some of them down back in my day.
We might stumble across more of these crosses. We better beware."
OLD MAN BILL Loyalty +1
1. GIN: Let's just go. This ain't our business.

whether to take supplies or leave them for the starving villagers, and investigate the uncanny. Mammon and his centipede express to Hell are still out there somewhere, making a mockery of both timetables and 19th century engineering practices as they thunder through the countryside. Killing him could get you back your soul. It's worth a try, anyway. And it might be fun.

For now, though, it's cold. Heading to a town would be good, as there might be shops there to tool up on new weapons, but first we need to check out that old hut by the side of the road.

GANG BANG

Once you've built up a few extra members to your posse, you can start thinking about different ways to approach missions. The game shares more with *Desperados III* than a setting and a liking for the quicksave key (as of patch 1.5, anyway), giving each character special abilities. Gin Carter has a short-ranged skill that can shoot through cover, damaging every enemy within its area of effect. Flynn can swap places with any character at the cost of one hit-point each, great for pulling an entrenched enemy out of cover or finishing off bad guys with just a sliver of health left. Others have more eldritch endowments to play with.

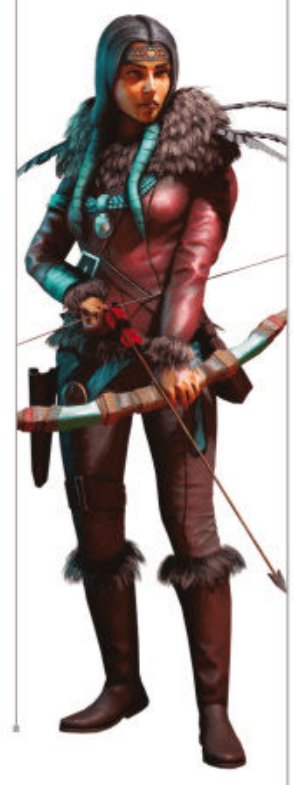
Eventually you'll unlock a gang of six outlaws, each with their own skills and inventory, ready to tear into the riflemen, shotgunners, exploding drunks (grenade launchers with apparently infinite ammunition), zombies and witches who infest every rickety wooden structure. *Hard West 2* can live up to its name, as enemies are plentiful and eventually tough. They start off killable with one shot, but pretty soon double their hit points, bringing your bravado-fuelled rampages to an end unless you spend some time softening them up first. Characters can hold two weapons, plus throwables, each of which will have a different AP cost, deciding whether or not you can afford to move and still use your rifle (you won't – rifles take all three action points to fire, but their damage and range are unmatched).

Shotguns and explosives have an area of effect, and can hurt your allies. Killing an ally, however, can trigger bravado, so perhaps it's worth it, especially as members of your team never really die, coming back to life after the battle with one hit point ready for a trip to the surgeon, if you've got the cash.

A full house levels it up and a royal flush makes it even better

Then there are the cards, which you'll pick up occasionally as you wander round the map. They're normal playing cards, only slightly enchanted, and on their own can add extra hit points, luck or speed. But this is the Old West, so giving a character a valid poker hand gets you something extra. Holding two pair may unlock an ability, but a full house levels it up and a royal flush makes it even better. It can help to have a poker guide or Wikipedia to hand while doling out cards, unless you're an actual cowboy.

Take Laughing Deer. He needs to hold a pair to unlock his Wild Run ability, which adds extra damage for every two squares he charges into battle. Add extra cards for a flush and an area of effect war cry is added to daze nearby enemies, while a straight flush increases base damage and gives allies a perk. Sending him zig-zagging across the level in a maximum-range killing spree among spread-out enemies, and watching the fires of bravado ignite each time he clubs another rifleman to the ground, is among one of the most satisfying sights the game has to offer.



BOOM TOWN

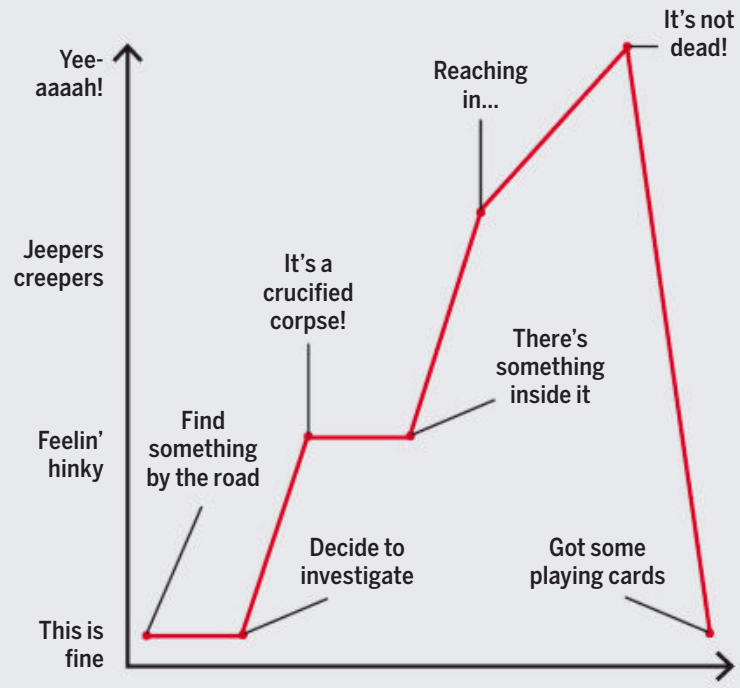
Less satisfying, however, are the things you'd expect to happen but which don't. Throwing a stick of dynamite should have a devastating effect on structures, which look lightly built and tinder dry. It does not. Area of effect attacks are two-dimensional, limited to the level you're on and not affecting those immediately above or below, something especially frustrating with shotguns, which you should be able to use to knock someone off a rooftop. And cover can't be blown away or vaulted over, though your characters do a good job of pathfinding the rest of the time, scaling ladders and bursting through windows. Replay value may be limited, as levels are more like puzzles to be solved, enemy positions not mixing up if you take another shot at them, and there's no multiplayer to enjoy.

Given time, enemies appear who have the same sort of supernatural abilities as your characters, which feels like cheating on their part as their hit points return to normal after a flurry of gunfire. Other enemies like to charge in and start lobbing unending numbers of grenades everywhere, causing your characters to bleed their own hit points alarmingly fast. There are ways to mitigate this, of course, the Heads Down manoeuvre stopping the bleeding and food to build your points back up, but they all take action points to use.

None of that really matters though, as *Hard West 2* is as solid as the safe in the town's bank. The one the outlaws have elaborate plans to rob. The combat is crunchy, the bits in-between don't outstay their welcome, and the whole supernatural cowboy setting still has just enough shine on it to be engrossing. There's more than enough room in our town for a game like this. ■

CURVE OF TERROR

Objects by the roadside may appear less terrifying than they are



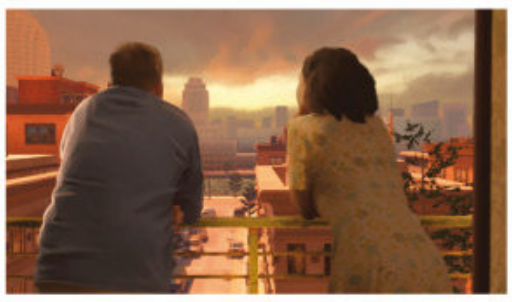
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

***Hard West 2* is a superb tactics game that totally looks like an *XCOM* clone but it really, really isn't, so stop comparing.**

85

ABOVE: "I wish they hadn't installed the windshield at an angle."

RIGHT: What a lovely couple, I hope nothing bad happens to them.



Sometimes, you sweep a scene for interactive areas.

Beer there, drunk that.

FALLING FOR IT

AS DUSK FALLS is a page-turner without pages

By Luke Kemp

On the face of it, this is a hard sell to the videogame crowd. There's no direct control over an avatar. You complete QTEs and make choices, and... that's about it, really. Yet the limitations of the format are transformed into strengths here. You may initially mourn the loss of the ability to spin on the spot and jump around on tables during poignant dialogue, but once you're playing? You'll want little more than to see what happens next.

The story concerns two very different families brought crashing together during a small-town motel siege. To explain much more than that would run the risk of spoilers which, in a game like this, could tear holes through the experience.

As a motion comic, there's almost no full animation present. Instead, what are essentially comic panels are presented one after the other with subtle fade-in transitions. I worried that this would break the atmosphere for me, but I got used to it almost straight away.

Two words that constantly pumped through the heart of the game during my playthrough were intimacy, and pace. I quickly began to care about all of these people and what happened to them, and more than once I found myself agonising over a decision. I felt close to the people; close to the story; close to making a decision that I would regret. Similarly, with no possibility of the player becoming lost or distracted in the game world, the developer has huge control over the pace of the story – and they nail it.

I didn't even mind the quick time events. Hell, I *liked* them. It amuses me greatly that the game features not one, but two dishwashing QTEs, but other than that, their inclusion makes sense, and often even adds to a scene's tension. Trying to escape a pursuer over rough terrain; hurriedly hotwiring a car; getting a stubborn bit of food off a plate; you know, that sort of thing.

I began to care about these people and what happened to them

DAFFY DUSK

It probably sounds like I love *As Dusk Falls*, and that's because I do. However, when you love somebody, you have a duty to point out any important mistakes that they make. This is why I have to say that the ending is pretty shit.

I'm so frustrated with it, it's made me swear in a review for the first time in five years of freelancing. I'm talking specifically about the final scene; the scene that everybody gets regardless of any choices they made beforehand. The scene that plays out no matter who's dead, arrested, divorced, or forgot to do the dishes. It's cheap, it's lazy, and I hate it. Sticking that scene on the end of *As Dusk Falls* is like supergluing a Funko Pop to the hood of a Rolls Royce.

Nonetheless, I still liked the way that my first attempt at the story turned out. Events and relationships ended in a messy, realistic way that I wish I could share with you, and as the credits rolled, I was already thinking about what I'd do differently next time, the ending I'd like to see, and how I might get there.

There were a few bumps in the road on the way to that final sequence, but they were more potholes providing brief shakes than landmines that sent the wheels flying off. For example, the main disadvantage of the visual presentation, and one that could not be sidestepped entirely, is that static faces cannot express emotion as effectively as faces in motion. Most of the time, this wasn't an issue. But on a few occasions – usually when a character was caught mid-grimace in anger – expressions were unintentionally amusing.

It also has to be said that the handful of flashback sequences, while as excellently put together as the rest of the game, are robbed of a degree of tension simply because you already know that one or more of the characters don't die. I'm pretty much scraping the bottom of the criticism barrel here though.

If you're looking for a strong story that you'll want to replay at least once, and/or something to tide you over until we get that dishwashing simulator we're all waiting for, this is very much your game. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A comic that you play – and really, really care about

EXPECT TO PAY
$45.95

DEVELOPER
Interior/Night

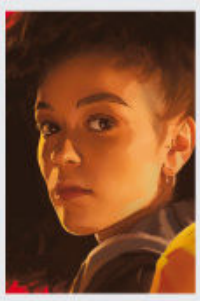
PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

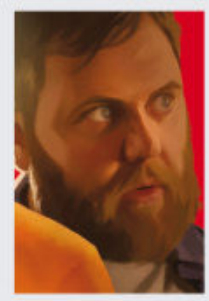
LINK
asduskfalls.com

KNOCK KNOCK *Who's there? Three of the main characters*



ZOE WALKER
Just six years old at the beginning of the story, the final chapter sees Zoe as a young woman dealing with (some of) the consequences of your choices.

JAY HOLT
A timid lad forced into rapidly escalating criminal activity, just how timid and innocent he is by the time his story comes to a close is up to you.



VINCENT WALKER
Father to Zoe, husband to Michelle. He starts to re-evaluate his life while trying to survive. Sounds a bit like Batman.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

As Dusk Falls is a gripping experience, despite an ending that is the equivalent of kicking itself up the arse.

80

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

Inspiration points: 10
Build
Build
Build
MAX
PHYSICAL BUILDUP!
Blank
The Show So Far
Oh! So that's why my dad told me to get rid of that shit and then burned off all my fingerprints!
Bonachera:
Well, folks in the audience, it's time I let you all know about Garza's broken taste buds.
Garza:
If you want to get along with my family you need to learn to love a good caramel-coated liver, end of story.
Bonachera:
If it was just that...
Bonachera:
Last summer we asked Garza to babysit my nephew and when we got back home the poor kid was crying... tell them, tell them what you did.
Garza:
I couldn't just cancel my reservation to that live-octopus eating course.
Bonachera:
Come on, Garza! That's nightmare material!

You can really feel the generational divide between Garza and the older Bonachera.

GIG ECONOMY

Everyone's a comedian in stand-up adventure game DE TRES AL CUARTO

Comedians Bonachera and Garza are partners, onstage and off. It's a recipe for tension that *De Tres al Cuarto* duly delivers on – and if you're wondering what the title means, it's a Spanish phrase referring to something of low value. The game is partly a hands-off adventure game where you learn about their relationship, and watch it unfold over several nights, but it's also a series of interactive comedy gigs.

Playing as Garza, the younger and newer half of the double act, your job is to supply the punchlines to Bonachera's setups, building up his routines or delivering knockout follow-ups as the game allows. You're restricted by cards, which are dealt out during every gag, and for your every response you're given three cards to choose from, including Poor, Punch and Build.

Why would you choose a Poor response? Or even the Blank card, which makes you flub the line? Well, sometimes you get three Poor cards, or two Poors and a Blank, for example. It's a card game, so it's down to the luck of the draw.

There is a basic deckbuilding element. Cash earned from shows can be used to remove bad cards, upgrade them, or buy additional ones. Eventually, over the dozen evenings that comprise the game, you'll go from sucking to sucking slightly less at the double act. Or you will if you're me, anyway.

Your job is to supply the punchlines to Bonachera's setups

DOUBLE TROUBLE

It may be intentional that Garza and Bonachera are not actually that funny, but I wouldn't have been able to tell the Poor responses from the Punch (better) ones if they hadn't been labelled as such, and if the crowd hadn't clapped *slightly* more for the Punch cards. The sound design badly mangles the shows, emphasising the soundtrack and the ambient sounds of the Menorcan shore over the audience's applause, and not creating the atmosphere of a comedy gig as a result. I didn't mind playing through the comedy sections – but I was doing it to reach the aftershow.

After every performance, we spend some time with the duo, picking what activity they get up to that evening. It might be heading to a bar, going back to their hotel room, or taking a walk, and it's refreshing to see a game explore a gay, established relationship in a mature way. These are vividly drawn characters that feel like believable human beings, although this is as much due to what they *don't* say as what they do.

In a story about the unsaid, this narration feels essential, giving their relationship huge emotional weight. This is a fresh, original interactive story, and also somehow a basic deckbuilding game. You'll put up with the lesser comedy sections – the payoff is worth it. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A deckbuilding adventure game exploring a comedy double act's relationship

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Deconstructeam

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/DeTres

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

An insightful game about relationships and a novel deckbuilder. The former is more accomplished than the latter.

78

BELOW: Your neighbour pops over when you go outside. Can she be trusted?

HOME ALONE

Solving puzzles isn't a chore in HOME

In Hitchcock's classic Rear Window, you spend most of the film unsure if the bloke in the opposite building is a killer or not. *Home* takes a similarly long time to reveal its hand. Is it just a game about doing chores, or will it turn into a horror game?

Not that it ever gets *too* intense – on either side of the equation – and I like it for that. As a child staying in their house alone, you have to tick chores off a to-do list, and there's a cosy, homely feel to the game as you gather laundry, take the rubbish out and feed the dog.

The backstory is fun: you're too young to go to an escape room, so your folks have set you up some simple puzzles to complete at home. There are a couple of locked doors that need codes, and the answers are somewhere inside the house.

While it's not as richly detailed as its semi-namesake *Gone Home*, by poking around you are able to get a sense for the people living here, including the detective-obsessed protagonist, who even has one of those serial killer corkboards on the wall of their bedroom. The puzzles aren't overly complicated, but mainly an excuse to fully explore the house, before *Home* lays its cards on the table at the end of the game.

At the risk of spoiling the end a tiny bit, it was refreshing to play a horror-adjacent game that knows the value of restraint. In fact, *Home* ends before anything bad happens, with one of two endings that decide the fate of the protagonist. It's not a scary game, but these endings do add a bit of gravity, much like the climax of Rear Window – a swerve to end the tale on a thrilling note. ■

73

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Yumii	bit.ly/HomeYumii

LEAF IT OUT

Make like a tree and get out in HER TREES

Before survival games came along and asked us to fill our pockets with the entire contents of a forest, adventure games were the most item-hungry genre around. But there's value in stripping it back to just the mouse cursor and some puzzling things, as *Myst* proved. That trend continues in adventure game *Her Trees*.

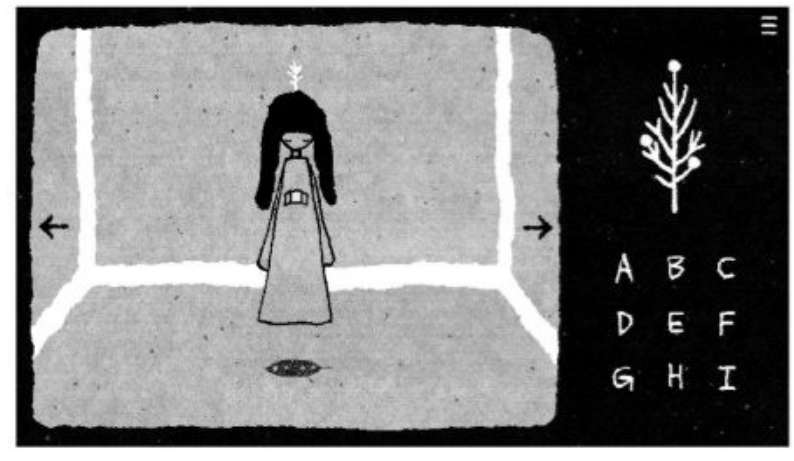
There are no keys or other items to collect. Instead, your inventory is letters of the alphabet – A to I – which you have to type in as the solution to every puzzle. Finding these passcodes is the tricky and quite ingenious bit, as clues are hidden in every orifice, in twisty bones or bits of twig, in empty pint glasses or torn-up missives. Sometimes the letters themselves are hidden, waiting to be revealed as you puzzle around, or sometimes clues take the form of diagrams that you can use as a guide to the alphabet grid in the corner of the screen.

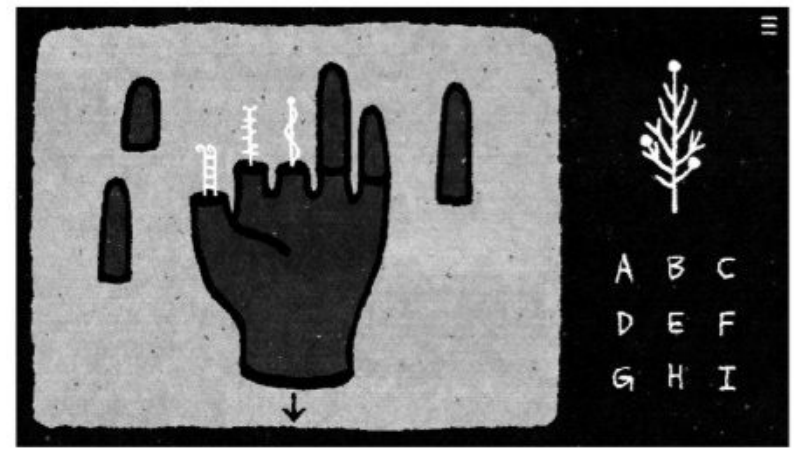
You discover these clues not by pulling levers or pressing buttons or twisting dials, but by dragging items around with the mouse, experimenting by piling this thing on that thing or moving this die by that die to form a pattern. The information is all there, you just need to piece it together, to arrange the constituent parts so they're *just so*.

The puzzles are clever, and all stuffed in one small and elegant room-escape style environment. You'll solve tough little puzzles as you turn to every corner of the room, filling in a tree and revealing an ending that is brief and baffling. *Her Trees* has a soothing atmosphere and lightly macabre puzzling making it a great place to linger. ■

79

BELOW: I'm guessing the trees are hers.

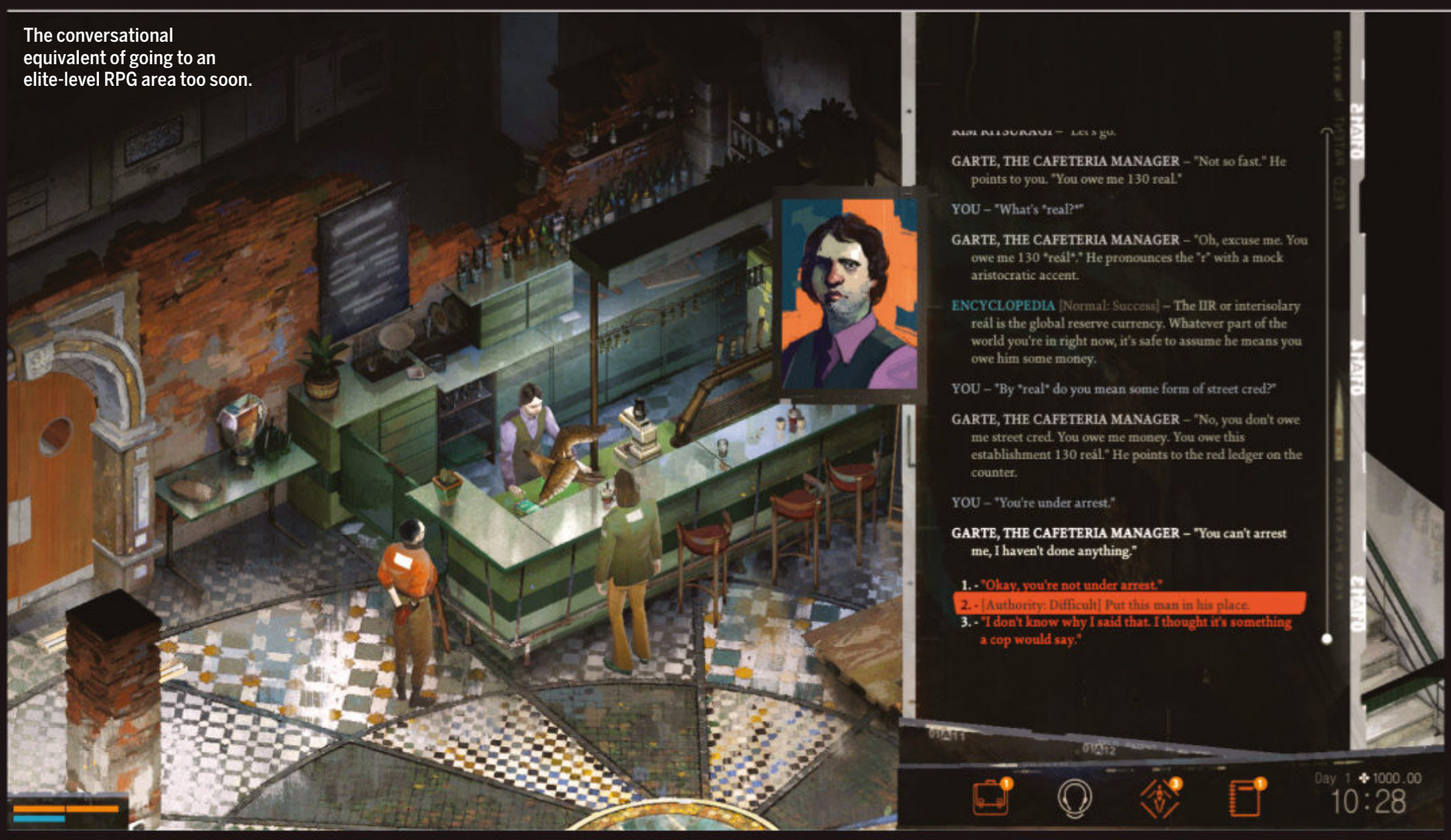




NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Stone	bit.ly/HerTrees

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott


GARTE, THE CAFETERIA MANAGER – "Not so fast." He points to you. "You owe me 130 real."
YOU – "What's *real?*"
GARTE, THE CAFETERIA MANAGER – "Oh, excuse me. You owe me 130 *reál*." He pronounces the "r" with a mock aristocratic accent.
ENCYCLOPEDIA [Normal: Success] – The IIR or interisolary reál is the global reserve currency. Whatever part of the world you're in right now, it's safe to assume he means you owe him some money.
YOU – "By *real* do you mean some form of street cred?"
GARTE, THE CAFETERIA MANAGER – "No, you don't owe me street cred. You owe me money. You owe this establishment 130 reál." He points to the red ledger on the counter.
YOU – "You're under arrest."
GARTE, THE CAFETERIA MANAGER – "You can't arrest me, I haven't done anything."
1. - "Okay, you're not under arrest."
2. - [Authority: Difficult] Put this man in his place.
3. - "I don't know why I said that. I thought it's something a cop would say."
Day 1
1000.00
10:28

The conversational equivalent of going to an elite-level RPG area too soon.

FAIR COPOTYPE

I'm sorry for playing DISCO ELYSIUM wrong

Most of the time, videogames let us hide behind a haze of false efficacy, fooling us that we could do astonishing things like reload a gun or do a chin-up. But *Disco Elysium* is different. It knows us. And, worse still, it knows *we* know it knows us, and it uses that cursed information like an emotional blackjack.

It's never more obvious than in the moments where you try to pick the dramatic, cool options. Yes, there's a chance you'll defeat that wall of fascist muscle with a breathtaking disco spin kick; it's just a gratuitously small one. Meanwhile, if you try to deal with anxiety-inducing horrors the game flings at you as you would in real life, it's no less merciless. On my first playthrough I was branded 'Sorry Cop', on account of my need to apologise to everyone. Returning to that save now makes me want to say sorry to past me for being so spineless, like some sort of hand-wringing temporal ouroboros of perpetual meekness, disappearing up my own pinched backside.

I'd love to tell you that it's all worth it. That actually, the cracked mirror *Disco Elysium* holds up to your psyche will enrich and improve you as a person. That in order to rebuild you must first be torn down. But it more often feels like a public information film about the dangers of overconfidence. "Yes, you might think you want to be a big-shot. But have you considered the danger of accidentally telling your new partner your name is Raphaël Ambrosius Costeau?" On no conceivable level does this mean that *Disco Elysium* is anything other than intoxicatingly brilliant. It's just that it challenges you on an entirely different level. So what if you can boss the fifth Pantheon in *Hollow Knight*? This is a game that can make you doubt your rightful position in the universe with a spiffing hat. It's amazing that, even after all the complicated internalisation, that there's any resource left to build a relatable environment.

In order to rebuild you must first be torn down

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A bout of crippling hangxiety that's somehow been fashioned into a masterpiece

EXPECT TO PAY
$56.95

DEVELOPER
ZA/UM

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
discoelysium.com

AMBROSIUS OF THE GODS

Revachol, however, is a real place full of richly-drawn people, thickened with the scar tissue of violence, revolution and corruption, like taking a holiday in a conflicting ideology. Despite being mostly repellent, it has a specific and special undertow that will keep you coming back, even if it's like watching a painful video of last night's karaoke. And the central relationship between your clown car of a detective and the neat efficiency of Kim Kitsuragi is a story in itself.

The result is something embarrassingly good: a game where the world, characters, or pin-sharp deflation of the player's ego would all have been enough on their own. Taken together, they're astonishing. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The greatest game to ever make you deeply question your worth as a functioning member of society.

93

BELOW: In some states it's illegal to let squirrels fish. But not this one.

BRICK ROLLED

LEGO CITY UNDERCOVER is Wii-ly good

L*ego City Undercover* feels like an anomaly. It only came out in 2013, but that feels like a lifetime ago. A modern version of the game would crowbar in Hollywood talent to voice Chase McCain, the wisecracking celebrity cop who feels like a warning from the past about the rise of Chris Pratt.

More telling, however, is the fact your in-game interface is based on the Wii U, something that feels slightly tragic and amusing at the same time: the controller equivalent of drinking mercury to cure syphilis. And although it often feels like you're being forced to solve crimes with a dead man's Etch A Sketch, it rarely detracts from this smart, often surprising open world experience.

The inherent Nintendosity extends to the way it bombards you with ideas. It might have been enough to drive around a fully realised Lego world, smashing things up and rebuilding them, but the game throws in grapple guns, disguises, and gambolling traversal. It's also funny, in a way that feels like it has some substance beyond the winks and quips. Handing tutorial work to your idiot sidekick Frank Honey is a bright way of imparting crucial info, and there's a disarming amount of comedy talent here, too: Adam Buxton and Peter Serefinowicz both turn up to play bit parts.

It doesn't always work – sometimes it feels like you're pulled into endless expositional cutscenes, but that's because there's a story here: another thing that sets this apart from other TT games that bring that honed brand of irreverent humour to established properties. ■

81

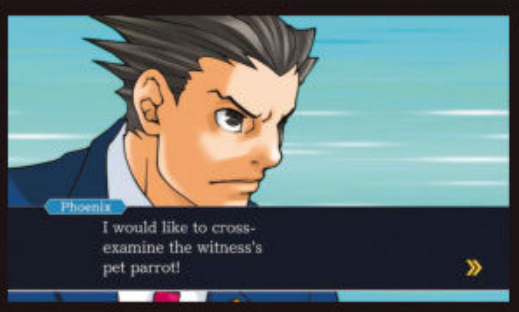
NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
$56.95	Traveller's Tales	TT Games

ART OF MURDER: FBI CONFIDENTIAL

Art of Murder is one of those lesser-known point-and-click franchises that's lost enough momentum over time to eventually become a hidden object game. It's mostly busywork, diminished by messy puzzles, vague clues, and dialogue that makes most text-to-speech programs sound like Gary Oldman in an Oscar-winning turn. Protagonist Nicole Bonnet isn't inspiring, either: more like a sentient pantsuit trying to fool people into thinking it's alive. The lowest point comes when a kidnapped Nicole has to scoot a chair around a noisy room without being heard; a puzzle so atrocious I decide it's best to leave her there forever. ■

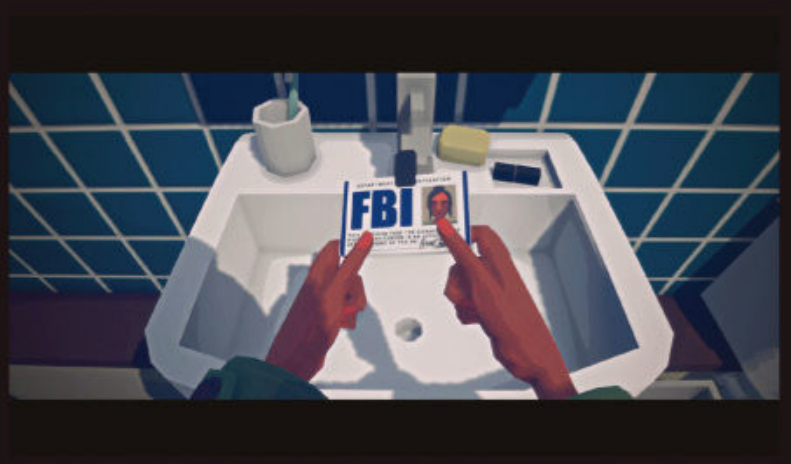
64



PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY

Most of the games this month are on the business end of law enforcement, so it's nice to mix things up, even if most of your time with Phoenix Wright is spent exonerating innocent people rather than catching guilty ones. There's a strange compulsion with *Ace Attorney* games, almost like a romcom with court procedure. Most of the time, you know exactly what's going to happen and when, but it doesn't matter. You just live for the moments when the music swells, a man in a magnificent blue suit points dramatically, and everything falls into place in a deeply satisfying way. Nobody needs to know it was all guesswork. ■

80



VIRGINIA

If games were established and self-referential enough to have their own version of SNL, *Virginia* might feel like a parody. It's hand-crafted from all the things that make Steam reviewers testy: it's short, story heavy and contains more than one woman. But even if the lack of dialogue occasionally makes *Virginia* feel like a two-hour cold open, there's enough atmosphere here to make it worth investigating, especially if your idea of a good time is sitting in a diner contemplating life's unspoken complexities. ■

64

GROUP TEST

BEST JOYSTICKS AND FLIGHT STICKS

Matt Brown take to the skies

Modern flight sims like Microsoft Flight Simulator, plus well established combat sims and games like War Thunder and DCS set a new bar for virtual aviation. In the case of Flight Sim, it leverages the company's cloud empire to fuse satellite imagery and artificial intelligence to create a spitting image of the globe. Picking up one of our best flight sticks amplifies the realism, enabling accurate control over dozens of aircraft. While there an abundance of joysticks, yokes, and flight accessories are there to choose from, especially on PC, we've condensed the best of them all, in one place.

Thrustmaster remains a market leader with the best joystick technology for the price, with the Thrustmaster T.16000M FCS HOTAS our recommended pick for 2022.

However, those playing on Xbox Series X and Series S require specific console-compatible hardware, like the Thrustmaster T.Flight Hotas One, among the best Xbox flight sticks.

With Flight Simulator-ready hardware in high demand and short supply, the T.16000M is one of the few high-value all-in-one solutions available at a reasonable price. That includes a reliable hands-on throttle-and-stick combo covering everything you need to get started, with a robust build and features for even the most sophisticated aircraft. It also pairs great with many of the best pedals, adding an additional dimension of control to your travels.

1

Thrustmaster T.16000M FCS HOTAS

THRUSTMASTER $239

The all-in-one T.16000M is the best joystick out there

The Thrustmaster T.16000M FCS HOTAS is a staple from a revered manufacturer in sim gear, checking numerous boxes for those with a taste for Microsoft Flight Simulator. The joystick axes provide high-precision control over pitch and roll, with a twist of the stick also handling yaw for horizontal adjustments. It primarily comes down to the in-house HEART technology, providing accurate 16-bit resolution for stick inputs and tension that feels right. The internals almost mirrors its enthusiast-geared Warthog joystick, nailing that same robust functionality at a more palatable price. The flight stick delivers a comfortable, ergonomic design when in-hand, with a variety of inputs to bolster functionality. That includes an eight-way hat switch placed up-top, which is essential when looking outside the cockpit with Microsoft Flight Simulator's stunning backdrops. Other inputs include a rear-mounted trigger and another 16 assignable buttons, ideal for mapping essential functions inches from your fingertips. Thrustmaster's aesthetics aren't for everyone, with its all-black plastic and orange accents and backlighting, but help create a centrepiece for your flight setup.

While Thrustmaster sells its T.16000M as a standalone flight stick, we recommend the accompanying throttle quadrant. The matching TWCS throttle builds on shared design philosophies, with another 14 buttons and a POV hat switch to maximise your inputs. The throttle makes it easier to tame even the most advanced airliners while serving a cohesive experience with minimal investment. And if you're looking to get deep into the range, matching pedals and panels are also on the market.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Affordable all-in-one solution
- Insane functionality
- Comfortable

95

Thrustmaster T.Flight Hotas One

THRUSTMASTER **$149**

The best flight stick for Xbox pilots

2 Thrustmaster T.Flight Hotas One is undoubtedly the best Xbox-compatible joystick, offering a relatively affordable one-stop solution for all flying games. While it pairs best with Microsoft Flight Simulator, it's also compatible with popular titles like Elite Dangerous and Star Wars: Squadrons, making this a wise investment for budding pilots. This entry-level setup includes a full-sized joystick and throttle, with smooth yet precise inputs, offering complete oversight over control surfaces. It also works on PC, too.

The joystick offers the standard inputs for controlling pitch and roll, with twist for yaw, and adjustable resistance to fine-tune handling. There's an eight-way hat switch, ideal for looking out over stunning, sky-high views, while 14 other buttons, a rear trigger, and reverse thrust provide ample inputs as you see fit.

We named Flight Simulator a must-play for Xbox players in our initial review, but the poor choice of accessories overshadowed its rollout. While some manufacturers have looked to appease the Xbox audience, your options are still relatively limited right now. While the Turtle Beach VelocityOne Flight offers a compelling yoke for console and PC, we're yet to see a better contender among joysticks.

With an affordable retail price and a robust suite of features, the Thrustmaster T. Flight Hotas One is an easy pick for Xbox users. While the PC market features a vibrant space of contenders spanning different price points, we recommend the Hotas One to any Xbox user, whether new to the scene or a seasoned pilot.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Affordable all-in-one solution
- Comfortable
- Great value

80

Logitech G X56 HOTAS

LOGITECH **$339**

Back in black

3 Those considering alternative HOTAS setups should look to the Logitech G X56, a moderately pricier alternative to the T.16000M, ideal for casual Flight Simulator pilots. The X56 fits the bill if you're jumping between a few games that demand a joystick with various customisable inputs and features spanning the two-part system. While it's not a massive leap over cheaper Thrustmaster gear, it's a robust HOTAS that's earned its spot on this list.

The joystick has you covered for all critical flight control surfaces, altering pitch, roll, and yaw. It has the same 16-bit resolution as similarly priced competition, including the T.16000M from Thrustmaster, plus hall effect sensors for long-term durability. You can also swap out the integrated springs, in turn adjusting tension around your preferences.

The accompanying throttle quadrant has twin throttles for finer control over multiple engines, while five hat switches and 31 buttons add a slew of bonus inputs. Logitech also included light-up RGB buttons, with accompanying software to change colours and assign those button inputs.

The X56 comes from a respected PC accessory brand, and after bringing onboard flight sim hardware experts Saitek, it's seen minor improvements over the years. The grey-on-black setup looks the part on most desks, with a sturdy plastic shell and metal detailing. The X56 is another strong HOTAS for newcomers looking to invest in gear or passionate pilots looking for relatively affordable solutions.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Comprehensive solution
- Great functionality
- Comfortable

85

GROUP TEST

Thrustmaster HOTAS Warthog Flight Stick

THRUSTMASTER $699

The beast in premium joystick controls

4 Venturing into the premium-tier flight sticks further opens your options, but the Thrustmaster HOTAS Warthog Flight Stick has remained on top for several years. The peripheral is a favourite among enthusiasts, granting both responsive and precise control over your aircraft, with a build quality that surpasses closest rivals. The result is a consistent and robust stick for all forms of flight, including Microsoft Flight Simulator.

The Warthog Flight Stick design comes from the similarly nicknamed A-10 Thunderbolt II, which helps nail down an ergonomic in-hand feel while also grounded to realism. The construction is on the high end, lining the plastic stick with metal accents you wouldn't find on cheaper alternatives. It also includes a detachable metal base, which helps on the desk while still adaptive to integrate into a cockpit setup. And weighing in at 3kg, this joystick won't be moving anywhere even if you're not using the included mounting solution.

Thrustmaster's HEART technology seen in the best flight sticks backs the Warthog, using magnet sensors for 16-bit resolution high precision, while also durable for multi-year usage. The company also boasts its five-coil spring system, which it claims provides tension and consistency without dead zones. The stick also packs plentiful inputs, with 19 action buttons, two eight-way hat switches, and various other assignable buttons to get you into the air.

The stick can be used standalone or as part of a larger modular set, and like many on this list, it shines when paired with other accessories.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Smooth, precise controls
- High-quality construction
- Great in-hand feel

85

Thrustmaster TCA Officer Pack Airbus Edition

THRUSTMASTER $349

Take to the skies and look the part

5 Thrustmaster unveiled its collaboration with Airbus in 2020, introducing a new flight accessories line under the aerospace icon's name. The partnership birthed an officially licensed range combining a legacy in accessories with iconic A320 signatures under the "Thrustmaster Civil Aviation" series. The Thrustmaster TCA Sidestick Airbus Edition headlines the range, replicating the real-world sidestick used in the Airbus A320 and A320neo. The TCA design takes influence from its existing T.16000, bolstered with features and design improvements, alongside its blue-tinted makeover. That came at a relatively affordable starting price, flying off shelves ahead of the Microsoft Flight Simulator launch. The fundamental features of the T.16000 translate to this sidestick, including the same HEART technology, promising the precision of 16-bit resolution, also seen in its more expensive products. It also features 17 assignable buttons distributed across the stick and the base, and an eight-way hat switch to look around the cockpit. One of the most notable changes comes with considerations for Airbus craft, including left-handed and right-handed capabilities, as seen in an A320 cockpit. It delivers this through a modular head, with four included modules to customise the buttons, with aid from a crosshead screwdriver. This makes it an ambidextrous stick in the process, as reflected by a physical switch underneath to change between left-hand and right-hand modes. Thrustmaster plans to launch a replica throttle quadrant, providing more control over engines. But it doesn't drop until the end of the year, making it best to use the stick's integrated throttle control instead.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Feels great to use
- Impressive features geared to Flight Simulator

95

6

7

Thrustmaster T-Flight Stick X

THRUSTMASTER $85

Cover the essentials and a little more on a budget

While it's tempting to drop hundreds on building a setup, the same fundamentals can come in significantly less. The Thrustmaster T-Flight Stick X is the proof, packing all the core functionality you need when sky-bound but available at a price that won't dig into your savings. You can find this all-in-one joystick as low as $70, including a stick, throttle, and the buttons you need to take your experience beyond a keyboard and mouse.

The T-Flight Stick X has been on the market for a decade, but its dated hardware doesn't fall short on the latest simulators. The stick will handle all essential control surfaces for flight, with relatively accurate input and adjustable resistance control. It also has 12 remappable buttons for primary controls, while its integrated throttle slider allows you to control speed. You even have a top-mounted hat switch for looking around Microsoft Flight Simulator's stunning vistas.

The classic phrase "cheap and cheerful" best fits the T-Flight Stick X. While relatively durable, its all-plastic design isn't winning awards. The stick dead zone also means this isn't as precise as alternatives on this list, with smaller movements often not registered. It's not going to blow you away, but it's still hugely preferable over using a mouse and keyboard. But most of all, it costs less than most new games, while many budget alternatives remain out of stock.

If you call yourself a gamer but only rarely play games that need a joystick, this one is a great choice. You might be surprised at how useful these really are!

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Affordable
- Features all essential controls

90

Logitech Extreme 3D Pro

LOGITECH $79

Just the basics for a cheap price

If you're eyeing up a simple joystick to get started, the Logitech Extreme 3D Pro covers your needs when demanding precision control over your virtual craft. It's functional but hardly complex, ideal as a low-risk investment. Better yet, it's relatively attainable, with stocking floating around, although a little above the usual RRP due to the high demand facing all simulation gear.

The Extreme 3D Pro joystick rocks one eight-way hat switch and rear-mounted trigger. It also has 12 action buttons, assignable to various controls in-game, and a small throttle lever on the base. It's all presented with an ageing but sleek silver-on-black design, ergonomic with a wide weighted stand that stops the stick from toppling mid-flight. Build quality also reflects the price, reliable and well constructed, although without the premium precision from top-end picks. Logitech delivers all the essentials here, skipping out on the extras to maintain affordability.

This isn't for experienced flyers or those looking for the most authentic flight experience, but it excels as an upgrade from a mouse and keyboard or controller. Using a stick feels incredibly natural in comparison, and while the market has made it hard to get started, it's one of your best options today.

The basic design has been around for literally decades, with only minor evolutionary changes. It's a delight to hold and feels great in the hand, and the desktop footprint is nice and small, so you can move it to where it needs to be then out of the way as you play. We used one for many years and the quality was so good it all still works perfectly.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Affordable
- Features all essential controls

80

LEARNING THAT CHEATS NEVER PROSPER IN WWE 2K22

Can the world's most pathetic wrestler capture the gold without winning a match fairly?

By Matt Elliott

Some people grow up watching wrestling and dream of one day being WWE champion. Of winning the ultimate prize at Wrestlemania, the grandest stage of them all, while tens of thousands scream their name and millions more watch at home. Of carrying out feats of athleticism so grandiose they echo through eternity, then, now, forever...

The wrestler in this month's diary is not one of those people. Yes, he's on the hunt for championship gold. But he has no intention of entertaining you along the way. Your enjoyment is poison to him, your hatred ambrosia. He intends to clamber up the rankings ladder and win a championship belt – probably one of the ones you forgot existed – without ever winning a match fairly.

Say hello to the most unworthy contender in the history of sports entertainment: 'Luscious' Lord Fentiman Skett. He's named after the sound of someone running from conflict while wearing oversized homemade clogs. He's the sort of creature who stopped tying damsels to train tracks because he decided it was a waste of rope; a man who saves his red shells in Mario Kart so he can fire them back at people he's lapped. Fentiman Skett makes Ric Flair look like Bob Ross.

CAWSOME KONG

Crimping this awful villain into existence is a painstaking process. The level of depth in *WWE 2K22* is intimidating, so I have to scour Skett's moves to make sure nothing inspiring, powerful, or entertaining accidentally wriggles, through like a historic bigoted tweet from an English cricketer. Skett is a ratings disaster, with his tedious arsenal of headlocks, roll-up pins and blatant cheating. His finisher, if you can call it that, is eye rake-low blow combo that even I'm tired of seeing, and he hasn't even had a match yet. As a concession to the noble art of wrestling I equip Skett with an athletic drop kick as a signature move. But it's not to impress people. Instead, it's an example of what Fentiman *could* do if renounced cheating. In a perfect world, I can hear Jim Ross's exasperated voice explaining it to fans, "Skett could get the damn job done legally if he just applied himself. But he only wants to do it the easy way!"

Physically, he embodies the combined aesthetic qualities of ponderous Tory lollipop Jacob Rees-Mogg, fish-and-foreigner averse horror writer HP Lovecraft, and Eric the cowardly cavalier from Dungeons & Dragons. At 192cm and 86kg, he's about as suitable for a career in professional wrestling as I am at pitching diary pieces that won't make my life a screaming misery. More on that very shortly.

My plan, then, is not only to misappropriate a championship, but to keep hold of it by cheating. You can't lose a belt by being disqualified, so I intend to make Skett the longest reigning champion who's never successfully defended his title. I've got a long way to go before that. I fire up Universe Mode and assign Skett to the Raw brand, assuming that I'll have a gruelling path ahead of me.

I CAN USE HEYMAN TO DISTRACT THE REF, WHILE I PICK UP A SLIMY VICTORY

My first match, however, is inexplicably Raw's main event, facing off against Kevin Owens. Even more bizarrely, Paul Heyman is my manager. Narrative weirdness aside, this feels like the perfect way to trial Skett's nefarious ways. I can use Heyman to distract the ref, while I pick up a slimy victory. And it's around now, literally at the very start of my journey, that the weaknesses in my plan become apparent.

The most difficult thing in wrestling isn't playing hide-and-seek with John Cena. It isn't deciphering why Mae Young once gave birth to a hand. Nope, it's trying to cheat effectively in *WWE 2K22*. This game is absolutely, rigidly determined that you play by the rules. I assume that having Heyman at ringside will help, but I'm wrong. Apparently managers in *WWE 2K22* are there to do *checks notes* literally nothing. Instead, I decided to mercilessly bump the ref so I can break the rules while he's unconscious. One problem: whatever I do, the referee will not stay down. I try whipping my opponent into him, but he deftly sidesteps each time. I try the more direct method of clattering him with a clothesline, but he no-sells like The Ultimate Warrior taking a Pedigree. There's a slider to determine how long the referee is dazed, but, even at its highest setting, the ref is back up before I've had time to pick up a chair, let alone swing it. This, combined with *WWE 2K22*'s byzantine controls, actually makes winning fairly harder than cheating.

THE RULES

1. No clean victories – every match has to include something illegal.
2. No kicking out of finishing moves, chair shots, or high spots.
3. No standard covers allowed – only rollups, possum pins, leverage pins, etc.

I've got Omos right where I want him.

TURNBUCKLE UP

I decide I'm going about this the wrong way. Instead of knocking down the ref, Skett will distract him. It's possible to remove the turnbuckle cover in *WWE 2K22*, exposing the metal ring underneath. This sliver of

JEER ARROGANCE *Six signature moves to send crowds to sleep*

THE DISAPPOINTMENT
Countout or cheap DQ: make it a match they'll instantly forget!

THE TURNBUCKLE TWIST
Fentiman Skett can remove a turnbuckle pad while blindfolded.

THE CHEAP PIN
Use your core strength for the purpose god intended: cheating. Just hope the ref doesn't see.

UNCONSCIOUS OUTSIDE THE RING
Nothing confuses crowds and opponents quite like pretending to be dead.

THE LOW BLOW
The truest test of your opponent's testicular fortitude. Why do they never wear a cup?

RUNNING AWAY
When all else fails, steal a quick victory then bravely leg it. You don't loose the belt on a disqualification.

thin metal is apparently so dangerous that any interaction with it results in an instant DQ. Eventually, the ref will notice the missing pad, waddle across the ring, and replace it from his secret supply of endless turnbuckle covers, giving me time to brutalise my opponent with a foreign object. The only trouble? The one thing that 100% guarantees the ref's sudden interest in turnbuckle maintenance is Skett going for a pinfall. If that happens, the ref replaces the cover immediately, which is exactly the opposite of what I need to happen.

An alternate plan forms in my head. What if I remove the turnbuckle pad and trick my *opponent* into using it? That would be vintage Fentiman Skett. But that doesn't work either. Because I'm the one who removed the pad, slamming my smirking face into the exposed turnbuckle is suddenly legal. Similarly, during the three-second window when it's safe to use a weapon, I go to crack my opponent over the head with one of the 40 kendo sticks inexplicably hidden beneath the ring. But he manages to wrestle it off me and return the favour, all while the ref watches on. At the risk of sounding like a deflating balloon animal at a disappointing party, it's apparently fine when I'm the one being assaulted.

I'm beginning to feel Skett is the victim here, which is a very odd state of mind for a man expressly created to break the rules. I initially decided that I could only go for the pin after using a foreign object on my opponent, but it's practically impossible to execute. For it to work I'd have to 1) remove a turnbuckle, 2) prepare a weapon, 3) wait for the ref to notice said turnbuckle, 4) jump back into the ring with the weapon, 5) hit my opponent, which only works 50% of the time, and 6) go for the pin once the ref is looking again. And that's such a conjunction of unlikely events that would herald some cataclysmic infernal event. So I decided that cheap pins can be part of Skett's victory strategy, so long as I've used a weapon at least once.

RAW MEAT

Sadly, I'm not having an enriching time on Raw. I'm booked in a series of tag matches with random partners, which isn't much fun for a sociopath like Skett. More bafflingly, I end up competing for the Smackdown tag team belts during a PPV, even though I'm not assigned to the brand. Skett and his new partner, Angel Garza, manage to win the belts, but I decide this can't possibly count towards my goal. Skett doesn't share glory. And I need to feel like I've earned my stolen championship.

The final straw comes when I use the curation menu to push for more singles matches. Skett is still headlining, which feels wrong like your dad's Steely Dan cover band headlining Glastonbury. Worse yet, the game only wants me to fight Omos, the 7'3" Nigerian titan who could probably use Skett as a toothpick. After six consecutive matches against him, I decide it's time to change promotions.

BELOW: Just two lads, winning belts from a promotion they're not in.

WHO'S NXT?

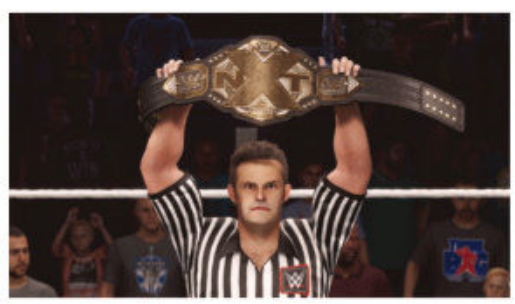
'Luscious' Lord Fentiman makes his NXT debut the next week, and to be honest, it feels like a more natural environment for him, not least because he looks like the third member of erstwhile NTX tag champs, the Vaudevillains. Yes, it's a step back, but I embrace it, not least because NXT's solid cruiserweight division means Skett isn't the smallest man on the roster. Better still, I have some tight, competitive matches, by which I mean I managed to cheat consistently without getting disqualified. There's also a strange,

SKETT IS BOOKED AGAINST TOMMASO CIAMPA FOR THE NXT CHAMPIONSHIP

satisfying sense I've broken the game. My stats are so hilariously low that the commentators don't know how to talk about me. They skirt around my abject failures, talking about 'challenges' and 'resilience', like I'm a brave relative with an embarrassing disease. And this might actually be true, because, as I learn after turning the blood on, Skett bleeds like a man with moist rice paper for skin. The slightest hint of fist to forehead and he's Carrie White on prom night.

A few matches later, and the game throws up the curation menu, asking me what I want. A crippling sense of Britishness almost stops me from being honest about my desire for a title match, like an awkward vicar avoiding the last French Fancy, but in the end I relent and ask for a shot. And, sure enough, Skett is booked against Tommaso Ciampa for the NXT Championship.

It's a decent match, and one that actually becomes slightly tense given the rules I've imposed on myself. A few times it feels like Ciampa is gearing up for his finisher, and I have to roll out of the ring and recuperate, knowing that I won't be allowed to kick out if he lands it. After removing about 15 turnbuckle covers in total, I manage to finally catch Ciampa with a chair shot, which softens him up nicely. He kicks out of my dirty leverage pin, but I'm able to clatter him with a miserable low blow and roll him up for the win. Skett is a champion: a shitty, cheating, miserably disappointing champion. He celebrates this momentous victory by stamping the hell out of his fallen enemy. How utterly classy.



All that's left is to hold on to my not-actually very hard fought championship and get myself disqualified or counted out from the next match, which takes place at an NXT In Your House PPV. But, as always, there's a problem. It's a no disqualification Triple Threat match. I'm confident I can make it work, however. Skett immediately legs it from the ring, arms himself with a weapon, and only gets involved when someone looks like they're in need of a thrashing. He dives in and out of the ring like a poisonous fish, delivering chair shots before retreating to relative safety. My opponents, Pete Dunne and Walter, do a fine job of pulverising each other and I plan to sweep in and finish the match. But disaster strikes: Dunne hits his finisher on Walter, and when I try to break up a pin with a baseball bat it doesn't work, so I drop my belt after a mere five days because of vomitous collision detection. Thus ends *WWE 2K22*'s moral lesson: cheaters never prosper, even when cheating is legal. ■

ABOVE: This guy bleeds just thinking about chair shots.

MINECRAFT MODS

I can never go back to vanilla tree punching. ***By Morgan Park***

LEFT: A mechanical press smushes useless ingots into sheets needed for recipes.

RIGHT: I may only have two minutes of oxygen left, but I'm living my best life.

For the 12 years that I've been playing *Minecraft*, I've only ever been really interested in the 'mine' part. Every new world would go about the same: explore around a bit, carve a simple one-bedroom apartment into a mountain, mine a bunch of ore, make the best stuff, then get bored. I like to build things that serve a real purpose, so once I've fiddled with pistons a bit, enchanted my sword, and brewed some potions, my *Minecraft* is basically over.

This is why I wasn't jazzed when my friends started talking about firing up another multiplayer server. I'd gone through the motions as recently as last year, but this one would supposedly be different. This one would have mods – 129 to be exact.

There is so much more going on in *Minecraft* now that we might as well be playing its sequel. Among those 129 mods, some of my favourites are tiny adjustments to *Minecraft*'s existing loot and systems. We have backpacks that expand our inventory! A hunger system that doesn't suck! Inventory hotbar swapping! It's really been a dream.

But the star of the show for me, by far, is the *Create* mod. *Create* is a monster of a mod that advances the technologically stagnant world of *Minecraft* with interactive machinery and automation. *Create* branches off from the usual tech tree of iron, diamonds and Redstone with cogs, gearboxes and conveyor belts made from alloys, wood and copper. The best part? *Create* machines work almost entirely diegetically. There's no fiddling – machines come to life with rotational power and make new things before your eyes.

ANDESITE VALLEY

The impressive tech of Create *mod*

MECHANICAL MIXER
When placed above a basin, this baby can mix up just about any drink, potion, or alloy *Minecraft* can throw at you. Assembly required.

MECHANICAL ARM
A piece of tech that can be programmed to grab specific objects and sort them into chests. A genuine robot, in *Minecraft*!

MECHANICAL DRILL
Drills the crud out of whatever you put in front of it, or whatever you slam into it by attaching it to a rotating death machine.

ENGINEER'S GOGGLES
A pair of specs that shows an overlay of a contraption's current speed, stress level, and other relevant stats. Make you look like a nerd.

GAME INDUSTRY

I started my engineering career by constructing a humble water wheel on a river near our house. The wheel generates rotational power, which I can harness by linking shafts to cogs and then to machines like presses, mixers and fluid pumps. My first build, a millstone that would allow my partner to make advanced recipes like spaghetti, was a lot of trial and error. It's ugly, but it totally works. We feed wheat to the to millstone, which grinds it into flour and then automatically carries it by conveyor belt to a storage chest.

MINECRAFT'S CREATORS HAVE FOUND THEMSELVES BEHIND THE TIMES IN THEIR OWN GAME

In times of uncertainty, *Create*'s built-in tutorials are exactly what I need. If I'm ever confused about how a new piece of tech works, I can hold W to 'ponder' it, summoning a beautifully thorough interactive demo of the device complete with bookmarks. And if I ever get confused by some other device used in the Ponder screen, I can simply click it to enter that item's tutorial.

Before long, I'd finished my second project: a windmill that carries strong rotational power down a dozen gears and gearboxes to power an automated mixer, metal press, automated crafting machine, conveyer belts, and a pipeline that feeds water from the river.

The process of linking devices to power sources is a big part of the fun, but the cool stuff you can make from Andesite alloy, copper, brass sheets, and rose quartz is also pretty cool. I never leave home with my helmet that sounds an alarm whenever a Creeper is nearby. My friend and I are now combining our engineering efforts toward building a factory that will eventually get us to full-blown trains. I can't wait.

BLOCKED

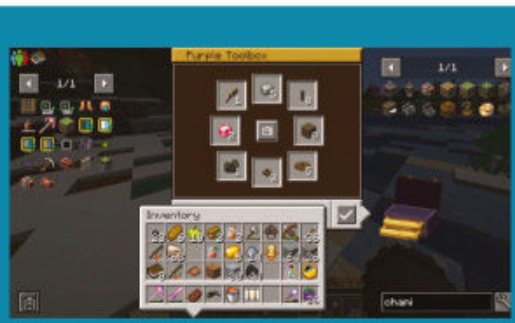
Seven modders have created an engineering mod so good that it makes *Minecraft*'s tech tree look obtuse and silly by comparison. And while the *Create* mod tops over 25 million downloads, Mojang is just now getting around to adding real variety to *Minecraft*'s caves.

In 2022, *Minecraft*'s creators have found themselves behind the times in their own game, but it wasn't always this way. There was a time when Mojang took bigger swings with updates. I remember loading my world one 2011 afternoon to find I could make beds to skip the night.

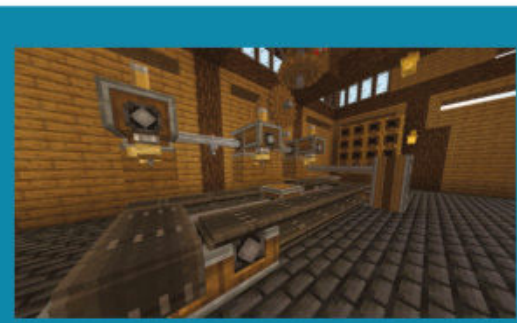
That same year, *Minecraft* also got enchanting, brewing and pistons, the latter of which was officially adapted from a community mod. It was a time when *Minecraft* was still figuring out how big it wanted to be. The *Create* mod feels like it exists in an alternate reality where *Minecraft* kept getting deeper. It is now the only version of *Minecraft* I'm interested in playing. ■

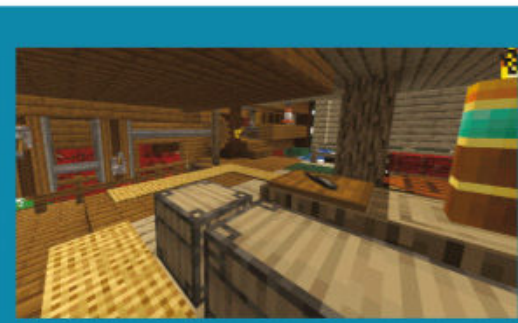
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE 2011	**EXPECT TO PAY** $39.95
OUR REVIEW 96	**LINK** minecraft.net



LEFT: My toolbox can store anything I need and has a handy "return to box" button.





RIGHT: Soon, this factory will manufacture a train.

IT'S ALL OVER...

PUGILIST COMBOS

New characters coming to **MULTIVERSUS**, exclusively on PC!

CRUSADER KING
MONARCH

SPECIAL MOVE:
Summon Pope

DESCRIPTION:
Start plotting your opponent's defeat, and ten years later they'll die in a hunting accident.

SPACE CADET
PINBALL WIZARD

SPECIAL MOVE:
Full Tilt

DESCRIPTION:
He... well, he kind of just shoots pinballs. Listen, sometimes the obvious answer is the correct one.

HARRY
DETECTIVE

SPECIAL MOVE:
Amnesiac Assault

DESCRIPTION:
Choose your loadout carefully, or you could lose half your health just loading into the arena.

ANATOLY CHERDENKO
PREMIER

SPECIAL MOVE:
Stalin for Time

DESCRIPTION:
Charge up your launcher to send your opponent flying up to the one place that hasn't been corrupted by capitalism.

GABE NEWELL
COMPANY PRESIDENT

SPECIAL MOVE:
Knife Collection

DESCRIPTION:
He's got some incredibly powerful attacks, but don't spam them – he can only do each one twice.

ROBIN VALENTINE
TEAM PCPP

SPECIAL MOVE:
Deadline Dash

DESCRIPTION:
His attacks aren't great, but every time he takes a hit he knocks five points off *MultiVersus*' review score.

...UNTIL NOV 28

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